

THE ETERNAL DUSTBIN



L. G.
MOBERLY



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THE ETERNAL DUSTBIN

POPULAR NOVELS

BY

L. G. MOBERLY

PUBLISHED BY

WARD, LOCK & Co., LIMITED.

In Various Editions

ANGELA'S MARRIAGE.
CLEANSING FIRES.
CHRISTINA.
DAN AND ANOTHER.
DIANA.
FORTUNE'S FOUNDLING.
A HEART OF GOLD.
HIS LITTLE GIRL.
HOPE, MY WIFE.
IN THE BALANCE.
THE SIN OF ALISON DERING.
JOY—A HAPPY SOUL.
A TANGLED WEB.
THAT PREPOSTEROUS WILL.
PHYLLIS.
A VERY DOUBTFUL EXPERIMENT.
VIOLET DUNSTAN.
A WAIF OF DESTINY.
A WOMAN AGAINST THE WORLD.
UNTIL SEVENTY TIMES SEVEN.
AFTER LONG YEARS.
MAID MARJORY.
SUNSHINE ALL THE WAY.
THE KEY OF GOLD.
VERE.
BARBARA.
UNDYING MUSIC.
THE VOICE.
LITTLE GREATHEART.
THREADS OF LIFE.
RENEWAL.
STEPPING STONES.

THE ETERNAL DUSTBIN

BY
L. G. MOBERLY

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DEDICATION

DEAR DR. SWAYNE—

Will you accept the dedication of this book ?
In one of the characters I have tried, however
feebly, to portray your friend and mine, who, as
you truly said, remains always "a kindling
inspiration."

Yours sincerely,

L. G. MOBERLY.

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CHAPTER I

A HOSPITAL WARD

“**Y**OUTH WINS.” The name attracted my attention in the advertisement columns of a newspaper, and I smiled. I have not read the book. I do not know along what lines it runs. I can only imagine that its pages pourtray the ultimate triumph of the young over the old, or as some would have it, the inevitable triumph of youth over old age. And, sitting here in my armchair beside the window, looking out across my hillside garden, to the wide spaces of earth and sky, I fall to wondering whether it is really so certain that youth is the inevitable conqueror: that the young—in modern phrase—always “come out on the top!”

Memory awakes, and I remember what, indeed, I never forget—Elizabeth, and Elizabeth’s story, at which I was only a looker-on; my own life story; and many other people’s life stories, which have been woven into my own. They all come back to me now, when I lift my eyes to see the glory of the autumn woodlands spread out along the hillside; and to watch the clouds drift across that great

expanse of sky, which is spread over the wide plain between me and the far-off hills. Behind the hills presently the sun will drop in the sky, which is already turning golden; but the thoughts that are stirring in my mind to-day will perhaps bear fruit. If my brain and my hands will let me do such a thing, such a daring and adventurous thing, I should like to write down some of those memories which come drifting into my mind; to paint again some of the many pictures which I can visualise, as the past, bit by bit, comes back to me.

Someone—it will come back to me later who it was—laughingly used the expression “the eternal dustbin,” and I take it that into that dustbin go all the happenings of our lives, to be sorted out by and bye; some of them are permanently thrown away as rubbish, whilst some others are imperishable, their impress will never die. So what I write here, resembles a miniature eternal dustbin. Some of the happenings will pass into oblivion, barren of results, but some will carry their results on with them into the Life Beyond.

As men count years, I must write myself down an old woman, although it is absurdly difficult for me even now to realise that I have reached not only age, but old age! I have left far behind me my three score and tenth birthday! Four score years is already looming ahead of me, and not so very far ahead either; but although the pessimistic Psalmist avers that four score years spell labour and sorrow,

I venture to differ from his pessimism. I do not feel in the least that my days are labour and sorrow. Far from it. I enjoy my days very much ; and I cannot believe that Elizabeth's days will ever be labour and sorrow either, even if she too should reach the age of four score years. Labour and sorrow are not words that fit themselves into her personality, or belong to her at all. Elizabeth labouring and sorrowing is a contradiction in terms, and in and out of much of my life, bits of Elizabeth's story run like a fine golden thread.

To write down now, all that remembrance brings back to me of her and her story, with which is interwoven so much of my own life, will renew the vigour of my mind, and keep her memory green ; and to keep Elizabeth's memory green is a task well worth doing ; at least so it seems to me. True, I have only seen her life, as it were, in shreds and patches. But her close intimacy has been mine ; and during each particular shred or patch of life I have lived with her, I have obtained an inward knowledge of her heart, and of her standpoint towards her environment, which perhaps few others have done. I speak of that I know. And amongst all the meandering reminiscences which my idle, or shall I say leisured, old age, intends to write down, I will begin with Elizabeth.

What was the actual beginning ?

I sit and look out over my big smiling landscape, and out of the mists of the past—as the veil of

sunset glory is woven over the autumn trees, the beginning comes drifting back into my mind. The mists float and sway about the past, clearing off here, swooping down there ; revealing and concealing almost simultaneously, as my thoughts go back and back. Yet the landscape does finally emerge, and at last I reach a murky March day, when a real London fog hung over London—the sort of fog one only expects in November. But that year it came in March, a cold, wintry, Novemberish March.

I see a thoroughfare slippery with slime ; a fog, which though not absolutely dense, was just bewildering enough to render road crossing dangerous, just bad enough to make one pause on the kerb, before starting into the roadway. I was not in my first youth, indeed I was just over forty, but I was a vigorous woman ; my life was full of energetic work ; and I knew nothing of nerves, where crossing London streets was concerned. I merely paused upon that particular kerb, because the shifting fog had that moment thickened at the point at which I intended to cross ; and I waited until it should lift again, to show me the slowly moving mass of vehicles in the roadway.

I stood there only a few seconds, before the fog lifted in that amazingly sudden way in which fogs do lift, and in that moment of lifting I took my plunge. Everything seemed fairly clear ; I saw no difficulty in crossing, and I stepped light-heartedly off the kerb.

What happened next? I could not possibly explain. A heavy van loomed up with surprising suddenness, out of what had a moment before seemed a comparatively empty space. There had been nothing, and then came a sort of Juggernaut! After that—chaos!

Even now, I can distinctly remember stepping off the pavement, looking to right and left, and feeling confident that I should be able to cross in safety; I did nothing reckless. I looked round with care. I took no undue risks. As I say, I was not an old woman in those days—I had only just reached my two-score years, and crossings held no terrors for me. It was only commonsense caution that had made me wait on the pavement at all. But the road was amazingly slippery; the fog dropped down again all at once, and became a trifle more confusing than I had imagined; that great van suddenly towered over me, like some Juggernaut car; and before I could realise what was happening, much less utter an exclamation, I knew that I was down in the slippery roadway, and that something was pressing the consciousness out of me.

For one moment a medley of lights seemed to flash before my eyes; a sound of cries and rumblings was in my ears; an almost unendurable pain seared me like a hot iron, and then everything was swallowed up in darkness—a darkness that was black, dense, unfathomable, out of which I could not grope my

way. All my world was merged in one sensation—a longing to get out of the dark. I was eternally struggling in a blackness from which I could find no outlet; it shut me in like a pall. It weighed me down, so that even the power to cry aloud was gone from me; it pressed upon me with actual tangible force. It seemed to me that I groped in that overwhelming darkness for years and years, and æons of years—hearing no sound, seeing no light, aware only of a great pain, a great loneliness, a great terror.

Then all at once, how or why I did not know, from far away along a long tunnel of night, a faint gleam came to me; and I seemed to force myself to struggle towards it. The gleam deepened, it glowed brighter; some of the intolerable weight of darkness was lifted from me; the weight grew less, and I was aware of a voice. The voice came from very far away; it sounded thin and weak, but still it was a human voice, and that alone held promise of comfort. Presently I could distinguish words.

“Try again, try again.”

The voice was a man’s voice, rather deep and resonant; and following his words, a woman’s voice spoke.

“It seems pretty hopeless. Is it any use trying? She has gone too far. I don’t believe we can possibly get her back.”

“I don’t believe she has gone as far as you think. I believe we *can* get her back. Try again. I

believe she is coming round." This time it was the man's voice ; and now the sound of both voices reached me more clearly. The glimmer of light far down the black tunnel broadened into more than a gleam.

" Will you try to drink this ? "

The man's voice said these words, and I faintly sensed that they were addressed to me ; whilst at the same moment something hard touched my lips, and I opened my eyes.

At least I suppose I opened my eyes, for the darkness suddenly rolled quite away, and I looked straight into a man's kind, rather troubled face, upon which the gas-light fell. After my long groping in black darkness, that gas-light nearly blinded me, and I shut my eyes again ; it really seemed too much trouble to keep them open. But a hand was laid upon my hand, and I somehow knew that I was not to be allowed to drop back into darkness. Somebody was trying to rouse me ; my groping consciousness realised what a strong, comforting grasp there was in that hand. I felt as if, by clinging to it, I could shake away the blackness round me ; and the man's quiet voice had a quality of strength : its tones were impossible to resist.

" I want you to drink this ; listen to what I say ; don't go to sleep again yet ; this will do you good. Open your eyes, and drink what I am giving you."

Again I opened my eyes, and this time I saw a second face—a woman's this time—a fair, rather hard face, with shrewd eyes.

"Try to do what Mr. Mason tells you, Nineteen," the woman said firmly, and something in her manner or her words penetrated to my sense of humour; and I wanted to laugh; all at once I wanted to laugh.

It struck me as so comic that I should be ordered about, as if I were quite a little girl. The humour of it pleased me, and I laughed. At least I meant to laugh, and I heard a feeble little cackle, which was, I conclude, all the laughter I was capable of managing under the circumstances.

"Why do you call me Nineteen?" I heard a ridiculously squeaky little voice ask, and it came to me with a shock that the funny little voice was my own. I wondered with futile wonder why nobody answered my question! I drank what the man was putting to my lips; and the remaining mists and darkness rolled further away, so that I slowly realised I was in a bed; that the bed had a screen round it; that the kind-faced man was on one side of the bed, the shrewd-eyed woman on the other.

"You have had a little accident," the man explained, and again I realised that I liked his voice; it was firm, there seemed to be a background to it. "You were brought in here after the accident. This is St. Matthias' Hospital. You

mustn't worry at all; you will be quite comfortable, and we will take great care of you. You will be quite all right here."

"But why Nineteen?" I persisted, harping upon the one idea which seemed to fill my mind. "Why Nineteen?" I repeated with a sort of feeling that I must clear up that mystery, before I went on to any others.

"Because you are in Number Nineteen bed in a hospital ward," the woman chimed in, "that is all," and it dawned upon my slowly returning consciousness that she wore a nurse's uniform, "and in the wards of a big hospital, we are obliged to call patients by the number of their beds; it is difficult to remember all the names."

"Oh, I see," was my answer, "then I am Nineteen. How funny!" And I broke once more into that queer cackling laughter, which sounded so absurd that I nearly sobbed.

"Now don't laugh—or try to move," the woman said, rather sternly. I have no doubt she thought I was on the verge of hysterics, and perhaps I was. "Try to go to sleep, and don't bother about anything. You will feel ever so much better when you awake; but go to sleep now."

I should have liked to ask the kind man several questions, I suddenly wanted to know so much; but in the first place speech was a real effort; and in the second place, the man seemed to melt away suddenly and vanish; and the shrewd-eyed

woman tucked in the bed clothes, with a firm hand.

“Try to go to sleep,” she repeated; and then she too in some inexplicable way vanished through the screen at the foot of my bed, and was gone.

I suppose I took her advice, and went to sleep, for whilst at first a confused sense came to me of distant sounds, of china rattling, voices murmuring, footsteps going quietly to and fro, presently these sounds all merged themselves into a kind of peaceful droning, and I sank back into unconsciousness. Not this time into the unconsciousness of that black world in which I had wandered for so long. This time it was only the unconsciousness of sleep, that was broken by dreams, and I awoke refreshed; bewildered a little by the novelty of my surroundings, but gradually realising that I was actually a patient in a hospital ward.

My knowledge of hospitals had, hitherto, been confined to that of a very occasional visitor; so occasional, indeed, that I believe I had only twice before been inside the walls of any of our great hospitals. And on those two occasions merely to see a patient, leave her a few flowers, and depart—with a feeling that the place smelt rather strongly of strange medicinal smells; and that everywhere there was a general air of uniform cleanliness and order.

Now, as my glance slowly travelled round, I found myself dreamily reflecting:

"I am a patient in a hospital; I am part of this great orderly, medicinal smelling place; I belong here; how funny!" and I suppose I smiled, for a nurse, passing the foot of my bed, from which the screen had been removed, paused, and looked at me, with an answering smile.

"Feeling better, Nineteen?" she said briskly.

I afterwards learnt that she was the staff nurse of the ward, second in command to the sister—the lady of the shrewd eyes. But at the moment, I had not learnt to distinguish shades of differences in uniforms, and a nurse to me was merely a "nurse," whether sister, or staff nurse, or probationer, or lady pupil. I had no conception of the fine gradations which exist in hospitals. Nurse was just "nurse," as far as I knew!

"Yes, I feel awake now," I said in reply to the brisk question. "I am beginning to realise things a little. When the doctor was questioning me, I was more than half unconscious. I had come out of a black, foggy sort of world, and I was utterly bewildered, groping my way from darkness to light."

She nodded, as though she understood.

"Yes, I expect you did feel very dazed and queer. You were quite unconscious when you came in; you only came round by degrees. But you are getting on all right now; you are quite yourself, and you are doing splendidly," she added, as though she thought I might take alarm at her first words.

"I was run over, wasn't I?" came my next question. Memory had gradually come back to me, and I remembered the kerb, the slippery roadway, and the towering Juggernaut.

"Yes, you were run over in the fog. It was very bad yesterday. To-day is a very different day."

I only smiled again by way of answer. I did not feel inclined to talk any more. I was absurdly tired. My head felt light and idiotic, as if it did not quite belong to me; it had a balloon-like feeling, and a sharp insistent pain like concentrated essence of toothache, at intervals shot through my leg. But I could not help smiling, because nurse's words, "To-day it is different," were so obviously true. Most certainly the fog had gone. There was no doubt about that. The fog had vanished. The ward was filled with sunshine; it streamed in through the tall windows; it shone on the rows of beds, and made patterns all over the wooden floor, showing up the rough grains of the boards.

I am writing of a day many, many years ago, be it remembered, when in St. Matthias' Hospital, the ward floors were wooden, not tiled; when gas was the only means of lighting the place; when there were fewer labour-saving contrivances than are to be found in a hospital of to-day; when conditions were in many ways strangely different; and the work for the nurses far more exacting.

Through a long window nearly opposite my bed, I could see the bare branches of a tree, delicately

defined against a very blue sky ; and by the time I had realised the tree, I had recovered breath enough to say to the nurse in pleased surprise :

“ You have trees here. How delightful—in the heart of London ! ”

“ There are trees in the hospital garden,” she answered proudly, “ we have a nice bit of grass, and some plane trees right in the middle of the hospital buildings. We even have wood pigeons ! ”

I don't know why the thought of those wood pigeons gave me an odd sense of comfort ; but I closed my eyes, feeling suddenly that I was not after all so lost in a hospital wilderness, as I had felt when I first realised my whereabouts. The trees and the wood pigeons comforted me absurdly !

I suppose I must have dozed again—uneasy dozing shot with pain—for it was a good deal later in the morning, when I heard footsteps beside my bed, and the voice of the man who had been at my side on the night before. His hand was on my pulse ; his eyes met mine as I opened them, and looked up into his kind face with a sense of real pleasure. It was almost as if a friend had come back. The shrewd-eyed woman accompanied him.

I learnt later how rigidly hospital etiquette ordains that any doctor—whether house surgeon, or visiting surgeon—must always be conducted to the patient's bed by the sister of the ward, or the staff nurse ; he may never wander there by himself, or with a lesser functionary. I learnt many quain

morsels of hospital etiquette; but that was the first one which stayed in my memory.

The man with the resonant voice and kind face, was Mr. Mason, the house surgeon, who had charge of those beds in the ward which were assigned to one particular visiting surgeon—Mr. Furley by name; and because I had been admitted to the hospital during the week in which Mr. Furley was “taking in,” as it is called, I automatically became one of his patients, under the care of his house surgeon. “H. S.” we called him. I discovered that each of the four senior surgeons had a week, during which all accidents or surgical cases admitted, went to his beds, and were under his care; and each surgeon had his own house surgeon (shortened to H.S.) as inferior officer; an officer resident in the hospital, available at any hour of the day or night.

All these discoveries I made by degrees. On that sunshiny morning of March, I only realised Mr. Mason’s strong face and cheering voice, and both gave me pleasure; and a feeling of betterment. He asked me for my name and address, which I gave him—Penelope Marchmont; and then he asked for the addresses of any friends who ought to be told of my accident. I was not blest with many relatives; and I lived in a flat with a faithful old family servant, who was probably agitating herself woefully over my absence. I ought certainly to let her know what had happened. My only

sister, Carrie Dunster—married to a country clergyman—lived in the depths of Cornwall; and I felt there was no reason to worry her, at any rate for a few days; certainly no reason to send for her, or take any drastic steps of that sort.

“I’m not *in extremis*, I suppose?” I asked Mr. Mason. “There is no urgent necessity for summoning a sister from the Cornish wilds?”

“No—no—certainly no necessity whatever,” he smiled, and his smile held the same comforting quality as his voice; “you are decidedly not *in extremis*. Mind, I am not going to pretend you have only had a slight injury; you have not only been superficially hurt. That van which went over you did a good deal of damage; but we mean to patch you up all right. There is no question of *in extremis*, or of a serious illness; only I am afraid you are in for a longish job, and you may need a lot of patience.”

Because of his reassuring words, I did not send any message to Carrie and her husband; but a telegram was dispatched to my faithful Deborah, who arrived post-haste to lament over my misfortune. Deborah was a typical maid of the old-fashioned, nearly extinct type. Her green-grey eyes were honesty itself; her mouth was obstinate; her face a trifle bony; and she wore her hair scraped back into a smooth sleekness, which was the only form of coiffure that met with her approval.

She served me with a devotion which I have never seen equalled, certainly not surpassed.

When she came into the ward, an expression of frozen horror upon her face, I was hard put to it not to smile much more broadly than Deborah would have thought it correct of me to smile, under such adverse circumstances! I knew so exactly what was passing through her orthodox mind—the mind that belongs to her type. She was thinking that a hospital ward was no place for her mistress; that the universe must be standing on its head, when such things could be permitted, as that I, Penelope Marchmont, should be lying in an ordinary hospital bed, like any ordinary being—with other patients stretched out in the beds on either side of me!

Her face expressed all this and more, as Sister Lydia brought her to my side. (Did I mention that amongst other hospital idiosyncrasies of which I slowly became aware, the sisters were called, not by their own names, but by the names of their wards, and Lydia was one of the women's surgical wards of St. Matthias' Hospital.)

Deborah stood looking down at me, her lips actually trembling; unshed tears in her eyes.

"Oh, miss," she said shakily, "oh, miss, how-ever could they have brought you here?"

She spoke as if I were in a prison, instead of a hospital; and her glance went round the rows of red-quilted beds, with as much distaste, as though

the beds contained noisome reptiles, instead of harmless human beings, in various stages of dilapidation !

“They couldn’t have brought me to a better place, Deb,” I answered, “and where else could they have brought me ? If I was idiot enough to get myself run over, I am lucky to be in this beloved old world at all. I might have been utterly squashed by that van.”

“Oh, miss, you mustn’t talk like that !” she exclaimed, dismay in her voice, “it’s tempting Providence, miss, to say such a thing.”

Blessed old pagan ! Some far-off fears inherited from savage ancestors must have stirred in her mind ; I am sure she would dearly have liked to propitiate a dimly-known and much-dreaded spirit, if only she had known how !

“Well—Deb—I *am* still in this blessed old world, the van luckily didn’t squash me ; don’t look so unutterably dismal. Sit down and talk to me. You have been allowed, by special favour, to come and see me on a day that isn’t a visiting-day ; so let us make the best of such good fortune.”

Deb clicked her tongue in a way peculiar to her, and cast her eyes ceilingwards.

“Visiting days, indeed !” she said with scorn. “I never heard of such goings on—a lady like you, in a ward with all the riff-raff of London ; and keeping to visiting days ! They ought to be ashamed of themselves.”

She glared round the ward, as though in search of some hospital authority upon whom to pour out the vials of her wrath ; and I laughed, a funny weak little laugh, that did not seem altogether to be mine.

" I am very comfortable here, Deb ; and there is no reason why I should be treated differently from any of the other patients."

" No reason ? Other patients, indeed," Deborah snorted, glaring this time at a most inoffensive little woman in the bed next to mine. " I'd like to give them what for," she added darkly. " But you're never going to *stay* here, miss ? "

" I'm going to stay here till I am mended, if they'll keep me so long, and I hope they will ; this is much the best place for an accident case ! I want to learn all about hospitals and their ways, too, and I'm perfectly happy. You are not to be a silly old Deb. I couldn't be better looked after than I am here ; everyone is kindness itself, and I am splendidly nursed. I don't suppose I *could* be moved in any case, even if I wanted to be moved."

" You don't want to come home—to your own flat, and me to take care of you ? " Deborah's tones were tragic. I am sure she was convinced that she could have taken care of me better than the best trained nurse in the world.

" You dear old Deborah." I put out my hand, and touched hers, which was gloved in a black

kid glove, a size too large for it. "I am much too troublesome and complicated a case to be nursed in a private house; and you will have heaps and heaps to do for me, when I go back to you, very convalescent and tiresome. I shall probably worry you to death. If I came now, I should be obliged to have a trained nurse, and my poor little flat would be turned upside down—and—it would all be a dreadful bother. Besides which, as I said before, I couldn't be moved yet—I am not fit to be moved. I must stay here until I am quite convalescent."

Then I laughed, and I made her laugh; and before she left me, though she was not reconciled to the fact of my being in a hospital, still she was less tragically upset than on her first arrival. I believe I had at least partially convinced her that I was happy; that I was not being ill-treated or neglected; and that I was really interested in my new surroundings. There was no doubt about that interest. It had begun in the moments when I first recovered consciousness; it went on increasing from day to day; and out of that interest the threads began to weave themselves, which linked my life to that of Elizabeth, the little threads which have never unwound themselves again.

CHAPTER II

ELIZABETH

I FIRST saw Elizabeth on a Monday morning. It seems absurd, that after all these years, I can remember the actual day of the week upon which I saw her first; but the fact was fixed in my memory, because until that particular morning, she had not come into the ward at all. That morning was very sunshiny, and shutting my eyes to-day, I can recall the sunlight that poured in through the old-fashioned windows, showing up all those uneven boards of the old floor; making the brass gleam like gold; lighting up the flowers on the long table near the door into a jewel-like loveliness of purple and crimson and brilliant yellow.

I lay there watching the light on all these things, and listening to the cheery sounds in the ward, when Elizabeth came in with the staff nurse. They were laughing and talking as they passed into the ward, and I found myself saying in my own mind: "She is like a princess amongst the others." Why I used that phrase about her, I do not know,

excepting that from the first moment I saw her, Elizabeth did seem to me to be different from the rest.

To begin with, she moved with an easy graceful step that set her apart from those who slouched, or ambled, or moved with awkward, self-conscious movements. There was not an atom of self-consciousness about her. (Later on she told me that during her first weeks at St. Matthias', she had been afflicted with colossal self-consciousness, but that hospital life had completely worn it away.) Her head was put on in the way you expect the head of a princess to be set on her shoulders. She held herself erect, as though she intended to conquer her world! That conquering look about Elizabeth was so very characteristic of her, then and always.

She glanced to right and left of her as she went between the long lines of beds with her easy graceful walk; greeting the patients smilingly; jesting with this one, giving a friendly word to that. At my bed she paused.

"Good morning," she said, and I liked her voice.

It was such a glad voice; no other word expresses it as well as that one. Gladness rang in its tones, and there was a quality in it that made me reflect, "If ever she wanted to speak in public, she could hold an audience with her voice."

"You have come in since I went away for my week-end," she said, glancing at me interrogatively.

"I came in on Saturday afternoon late, I was stupid enough to get run over," I answered.

"You're my patient, you know," she said gaily, "but I went off at five on Saturday for my week-end; I only just caught my train. I thought those miserable eggs would never boil."

"Miserable eggs?"

"Ah! You haven't been here long enough to understand the inwardness of that remark," she said. "You see, the patients' friends bring them eggs, the eggs have to be boiled for the patients' teas; and it was my job as L.P., to boil those eggs before I started for my week-end. They took double the time any self-respecting eggs ought to have taken; they always do, on week-end Saturdays! I did so nearly miss my train!"

She passed on to begin her morning work, and our conversation was not resumed until later, when she came to my side again, armed with all the paraphernalia for my morning ablutions. To each nurse was allotted so many beds; and the patients in those beds were her charge, to wash and tend generally, and this Princess woman was in charge of me. I felt glad to be her patient. She had a heartening effect upon me!

"What did you mean when you called yourself L.P.?" I asked, whilst my washing operations were in progress; "and will you tell me your name?"

"My name is Grenfell, and I am a lady pupil, in other words a paying probationer," was the answer.

"I couldn't spare the time to sign on as an ordinary probationer for three years; and I am here only for a year, to learn all I possibly can in the time. We shorten lady pupil into L.P. You will notice we shorten everything here into initials! I suppose we save time by doing it. It is the way of hospitals."

"And you wear a black gown? I noticed you were differently dressed from the other nurses."

"Yes, we wear black alpaca frocks, and our caps are different. You will soon learn that sisters have one sort of cap; staff nurses another; probationers a third; and we L.P.'s yet a different one again."

Looking back across the years, it is wonderful to reflect that at the date of my accident, now nearly forty years ago, any nurse should have been dressed in black alpaca! But so it was! These insanitary garments were actually worn day in day out, and nobody seemed to be aware that there was anything strange in allowing woollen garments of that description to be worn for hospital work! Could anything more utterly unhygienic be conceived? Viewed in the light of our more advanced knowledge, it was of course an absurdity to have chosen for the sisters and lady pupils of St. Matthias' Hospital, dark blue, and black *woollen* materials; but I am bound to say, that setting sanitary and common-sense considerations aside, the gown she wore suited Elizabeth. Its dead blackness made the right setting for her fair colouring; her hair, soft and brown in

those days, waved becomingly under her white muslin cap, which she wore at a particularly becoming angle.

"You don't know what heart searchings these caps cost us, when we first come into hospital," she said to me that very morning, when I commented upon the pretty angle at which hers was worn. "The authorities rather frown upon our pinning them into a nice shape; and when we first come, we jam them on in the most dreadfully unbecoming way; we all look perfect frights, until we get accustomed to the caps, and less afraid of the authorities! After a little while," her eyes twinkled, "we find out becoming angles for the caps, and we feel less awe for the powers that be!"

"Are they very strict?" was my next question, whilst she deftly washed and dried my right arm, and put it cosily back under its covering blanket, before beginning upon the left.

"We have a good many rather definite instructions when we first arrive," again those blue eyes of hers twinkled mischievously, "but we soon discover that some of the instructions are impossible to obey to the letter; and some have to be taken with a good many grains of salt!"

I was interested. The tricks and manners of those in authority very often move me to amusement, not to say wrath; powers that be are apt to have such curiously hide-bound points of view.

"There are a good many rules here?" I questioned.

"There must be *rules*," she answered, grown suddenly grave, "I am not denying that in a big place like this, where there are so many of us, there must be rules; but it seems to me that rules should be so framed, that it is morally possible to keep them."

"It certainly would seem wiser to have rules that can be kept," I said, laughing that thin new laugh of mine which still amused me, "but are the rules here impossible to keep?"

"Well, one of the rules impressed upon me by the matron when I first came, is really *not* possible to keep," the blue eyes looked straight into mine. "She told me we were not to speak to the men—the students I mean. And, you know," a smile flashed over her face, "to keep that rule, would be a stark impossibility! Sometimes you may be helping a dresser for half an hour over one of his dressings. You can't stand there like an automaton, a dummy, handing him lint or wool, as if you were just wound up to do it, without speaking a word. Conversation comes naturally, and out of that conversation may come, generally does come, acquaintanceship, and friendship. If I were a matron," she spoke with sudden vehemence, and by now she was softly brushing my hair, "if I were a matron, I would insist upon the rules of ordinary good conduct, good manners, good breeding; but

I would do away with every rule which would almost inevitably lead to the doing of things *sub rosa* ; to evasion, and practically to deceit."

I liked her when that sudden note of vehemence came into her voice, when her eyes shone, and the colour crept into her face. I don't mean to imply that I had not liked her from the first ; her voice and smile had both made an instant appeal to me ; but the vehemence gave her an added human touch, although Elizabeth was always very human ! She was a quick worker too. She had finished my washing operations in a far shorter time than had the nurse who was in temporary charge of me during the week-end ; and she had done what had to be done, thoroughly and well. I liked the kind of sureness with which her hands moved ; the decision with which she lifted away the screen from my bed to the next ; her light rapid step down the ward to empty her basin ; the quick certainty of all that she did.

" Miss Grenfell gets round the beds in the ward faster than anybody else," the staff nurse remarked to me that afternoon, when the after tea bed-making was in progress ; and I noticed how much sooner the beds seemed to be finished than they had been during the days of her absence. It amused me to count the number of times during the twenty-four hours in which those beds of ours were made, or straightened ! Certainly no woman who has had hospital training can ever plead ignorance of how

to make a bed ; and what is more, those beds were all well and truly made.

I cannot quite put into words the effect Elizabeth's presence in Lydia Ward had upon the ward, and upon me. She was so alive ; she was so overflowing with some vitality of her own ; such gladness and gaiety were in her voice and manner, that she spread about her an atmosphere of sunshine. And I observed that she was genial and friendly to everyone with whom she came in contact, from the red-haired cockney wardmaid, to the hard-faced sister with the shrewd eyes.

" One of the rules here is so hatefully and detestably snobbish that I haven't the least compunction about breaking it," she said to me the very next morning, when washing time gave us an opportunity for more or less coherent conversation. " The powers that be ordain that the lady pupils shall not make friends with the probationers, who are, presumably, of a different class. Now, that rule I simply decline to keep." Her mouth set itself firmly in lines which, as I afterwards learnt to know, meant a bulldog determination. " One of my chief friends is a pro," she added, " and she is also a very remarkable woman. It doesn't matter two straws what her parents were, or to what class she belongs by birth. She's got a fine mind and a splendid personality ; and I intend to keep her friendship all my life."

To-day she would no doubt have ended the

sentence, "So that's that!" In those far-away days the expression had not yet been born; but Elizabeth certainly meant what the words have now come to mean to a later generation.

It began to dawn upon me that my nurse of the blue eyes was something of a rebel! To conform to the beaten track of hospital orthodoxy was evidently anathema to her; and truly I could not blame her for setting her face against a rule so full of snobbery and absurdity, as the one she had just mentioned. The idea of drawing distinctive lines between these women who were all engaged in the work of healing, was repulsive in the extreme; added to which, as I soon found, Elizabeth had a supreme scorn for any hard and fast divisions between class and class.

"Hospital life has taught me *that*, if it has taught me nothing else," she said, "it has shown me what splendid people there are in every class of life. I have learnt that I need not only choose my friends from amongst those who so insolently call themselves the 'upper' classes! Upper indeed! I wish some of them could spend a few weeks in a hospital ward. Then they would learn what real gentlefolk there are amongst hospital patients and nurses, quite irrespective of the amount of blue blood in their veins!"

In many ways Elizabeth reminded me of a nice frank boy: she was much more like a boy than a woman; though in saying that, I do not for a

moment wish to imply that she was unwomanly. Far, very far from it! She was womanly through and through; but she had much of the directness and simplicity that belongs to a nice boy; and of feminine subtlety I began to think, by and bye perhaps even not enough! She had not enough of that indefinable something for which our English language has no word! The French express it in that expression of theirs "*du chien.*" "*Elle n'a pas du chien,*" another woman said once of Elizabeth, and at the time she said it—at the time Elizabeth was serving her apprenticeship in St. Matthias' Hospital—the criticism was true.

Later on—— Ah, well, I will not anticipate. When later on comes I can tell the story that comes with it; things will explain themselves. In those early days when I knew her first, Elizabeth was refreshingly like a delightful boy; and she had no more notion of how to handle a man than a babe in its cradle. Yet she was close upon thirty, and good to look at withal! Lying there, watching her, and thinking about her, I found her an enthralling study; but I did not understand her psychology. I am not sure that I understand it now!

The men with whom she came in contact liked her—that was quite obvious. She was pleasant to them all, in a hail-fellow-well-met fashion; and by that expression, I do not mean that Elizabeth was ever free and easy, in manners or bearing. Her

worst enemy could not have accused her of anything free and easy. She was a lady to her finger-tips ; and I found myself chuckling faintly when Sister Lydia, pausing to speak to me one morning, glanced down the ward at Elizabeth, and said in her incisive tones :

“ Whatever anybody may say about Miss Grenfell, she is certainly a lady.”

“ She certainly is,” was my dry response. I did not altogether like the hard-faced sister, capable though she was. “ But what could anyone find to say about her that is derogatory ? ”

“ Oh, I don’t know about *derogatory*,” the sister said slowly, “ this is such a gossip shop, and some people chatter, because she is so friendly with Dorothy Standen ; Dorothy is only a probationer you know ; and some others make remarks about her and Mr. Drake.”

“ I can’t imagine why Miss Grenfell shouldn’t be friends with Nurse Dorothy,” I answered, “ and who is Mr. Drake ? I don’t remember the name. I haven’t seen him, have I ? ”

“ No, I don’t suppose you have, he has been away ; he is a dresser.” Sister Lydia’s remarks dried up rather suddenly, and she moved from beside my bed, perhaps feeling that she had been too talkative.

But she and all the nurses had dropped into a way of coming to my bedside for a few moments’ chat ; and a good deal of the gossip in that strange world

shut in by hospital walls, had filtered through to me. It all amused and interested me profoundly ; and I had discovered that amongst sisters and nurses there were a good many quaint little tangles of envy, jealousy, and malice : and that a perfect network of gossip surrounded everyone who lived and moved within the walls of the hospital. As for the fellow patients in the beds on either side of me, from them I learnt much delightful philosophy : and hidden beneath the tragedy and sordidness of their lives, there often peeped out gleams of humour, even of comedy.

No. 18, Mrs. Lee was her name, was there because her husband had incontinently hit her over the head with his hob-nailed boot one evening, when he had arrived home drunk. This was the true story of her injury, as imparted to me by Elizabeth ; but this was not the story Mrs. Lee herself gave to the world.

“ Me room was dark like. See ? And I tripped over an ’ole in the carpet. See ? And come down with me ’ead agin the grite. See ? ”

That was her free translation of Jem Lee’s violence with the hob-nailed boot ; and when a sheepish and scowling Jem, came to see her on the Sunday afternoon after she was admitted, she greeted him with an affection which was certainly not his due. Sullenly, and as if more than half ashamed of the offering, he laid beside her on the bed, a bunch of rather tired-looking violets ; saying gruffly : “ What

ho? ” But she never noticed the tiredness of the flowers, or the quaintness of his greeting. There was rapture in her face, as she picked up the flowers, and held them out at arm’s length.

“ Lor’, Jem,” she said, with a pitiful little giggle, “ you ain’t never brought me *flowers*? Garn! Why, we might be walkin’ out agin! Ain’t you a one? ”

On my other side, No. 20, was a dressmaker, who worked in a small way in an attic room not far from the hospital. She was a tidy body, with a worn, rather wistful face; and as she lay there waiting for a hip joint to behave as it should, she knew that her limited clientele must be slipping away from her, and that when she went out she would more than likely have to begin her uphill task of making a business all over again. Yet I never heard her grumble; some of the patients grumbled, but never Mary Dawson.

“ I’m sure I’m lucky to be in here, where I’m getting all this care and attention,” she used to say, “ and it’s something to lie and look at them trees out there, and hear the wood pigeons. We don’t have things like that down our street.”

I registered a mental vow that whatever species of needlewoman Mary Dawson might be, she should make some garments for me, when we were both at liberty. I admired her quiet pluck; her never-failing brightness. I knew I could never be as brave and bright as she was, if, looking into the

future when my cure should be complete, I saw confronting me nothing but an uphill struggle to make two far-apart ends some within shouting distance of one another. I am sure I should never have had her courage; her gallant, steadfast courage. I always look upon Mary Dawson as wonderful.

This digression has made me drift away from Elizabeth, and I had been thinking how popular she was with dressers and ward clerks, with all the men indeed who came to and fro into the ward. She was on pleasant friendly terms with all alike. I could not pick out one man, and say that he was more favoured than the others. To them all she spoke in her frank direct fashion, looking straight into their eyes, with neither shyness nor coquetry. She flirted with none of them; she met them upon equal grounds, as though they and she were all boys together!

Who was the Mr. Drake mentioned by Sister Lydia? That puzzled me. There was no such name amongst the dressers I had seen; and by now I had learnt the names of all the dressers in the ward; and for which surgeon they "dressed," as it is called. Drake was a strange name to me, naturally so, I suppose, as Sister had said he was away!

And then, one afternoon he came back, an April afternoon when the sunshine was making a jewelled loveliness of the anemones and daffodils upon the

table by the door, just as it had done on that March day when I first saw Elizabeth ; an April afternoon when the air blew in softly through the large windows, and one felt spring was really close at hand.

Mr. Drake was a tall man, and he moved with just a touch of languor, due I should imagine to some constitutional lack of robustness ; but there was no lack of strength in his face—chin and jaw marked character ; and character was written, too, across the well-cut lips, and upon the broad forehead. His eyes—grey-blue in colour—were set well apart ; his smile had a rare charm, an extraordinary charm, which in some inexplicable way caught at your heart. I have never forgotten Bernard Drake's smile. I saw it for the first time when he stopped beside No. 20 bed, and looked down at Miss Dawson.

" I'm back you see," he said. His voice was low and well modulated ; his manner of speech a trifle abrupt. " Can I dress No. 20 now ? " he added, looking round at Elizabeth, who, seeing him by the bedside, came quickly up to him.

That is another hospital law. No house surgeon or dresser may do a dressing without the attendance of a nurse, and No. 20 being one of Elizabeth's beds, it was her business to wait upon Mr. Drake, who was dresser for another surgeon, not the one to whom I belonged.

I had caught his name from Miss Dawson, and remembering Sister Lydia's implication, my curiosity awoke and clamoured for satisfaction. So this

was Mr. Drake ; this was the Mr. Drake mentioned by Sister ; and hospital gossip had coupled together his name, and Miss Grenfell's ? All this leapt at once to my mind, and I looked at the man with new curiosity. It had been borne in upon me that hospital gossip was aroused with appalling ease : that in a community such as that surrounded by the walls of St. Matthias, you lived more or less under glass, and not only glass, but magnifying glass ! Your acts were apt to be distorted into something quite different from their real meaning ; that was sufficiently obvious. And as for your words ! Well ! Let me recommend anyone who doubts St. James's statements about the tongue, to take up his or her abode for a short time in a hospital. He or she will soon learn that the tongue is indeed an unruly member, " a fire," and even " a world of iniquity " ! " Behold how great a fire a little matter kindleth."

That much I learnt if I learnt nothing else during the weeks I was a patient in St. Matthias' Hospital. The appalling weapon a tongue can be, came home to me there. But I learnt much more than that ! I learnt that a hospital is very truly a House of Healing : and remembering the patient untiring devotion of doctors and nurses, to all of us who were patients in St. Matthias', my blood boils when I sometimes hear people speak disparagingly, even with contempt, of those who work in our hospitals. No institution in this world is perfect : no human

being is without failings and limitations ; but to point the finger of scorn at our great Homes of Healing is grossly unfair and wrong.

I have wandered away from the April morning when I first saw Bernard Drake come into Lydia Ward ; when I first lay there watching Elizabeth's face, whilst she handed the dressings to him, and talked to him, as they both worked. I do not set myself up to be unusually observant, but some latent powers of observation or intuition showed me what lay behind the soft brightness of Elizabeth's eyes, the soft colour in her face. I was not surprised. After all, they were man and woman in youth's spring time ; and there was that about Bernard Drake's face which might well have drawn any woman to him. Wherein lay his extraordinary attractiveness I cannot exactly say, but the attractiveness was there !

At the risk of being called romantic and absurd, I shall set down here what I said to myself at the time, that his was the face of a Galahad : and his smile was one of singular sweetness, of quite outstanding charm. What wonder that Elizabeth and he should be friends ? Friends they undoubtedly were : the snatches of talk that reached my ears told me as much as that ; and as the days flew by, I heard it from Elizabeth's own lips.

My nurse and I had many pleasant talks during the times she spent at my bedside, ministering to my comfort ; and in that time together, I learnt to

know her intimately, and to love her dearly. With a light touch she sketched in for me a picture of her home in the West ; the grey old house within earshot of the sounding sea ; the garden where fuchsias and lemon-scented verbenas grew in profusion ; where great hydrangea plants bloomed amongst the rhododendrons ; where there was a giant cedar tree upon the lawn ; and bushes of white Scotch roses in the bed near the cedar. She made me see the big cedar tree ; the roses that climbed up the house, and scented the whole place when rose time came ; and the beds of white pinks on the lawn below the terrace on which the house stood.

" Mr. Drake is coming down to spend a few days with us at Whitsuntide," she said, and the exultant gladness in her voice told its own story. " I think he will like our great cliffs, and the hills behind the village ; and our nice wide Atlantic. From our garden we can hear the boom of the Atlantic, like some great organ note going on all the time, behind and beyond everything else. I love that perpetual deep under-note : and I love the wide sea we look at over our garden wall. I think Mr. Drake will like it too."

" I should imagine he himself has a nice wide mind," I answered, watching how her eyes shone when I praised her friend.

" Yes, he is a very broad-minded person," was all she said, but there was a whole world of pride in the way she uttered the words.

Little incidents of those days come flooding back to my mind, as I sit here, looking out over my great spaces of landscape, whilst my memories stray back to those old days of nearly forty years ago !

I recall a morning when I saw Elizabeth at the door of the ward, a sheaf of daffodils in her hand. She had been out in the country on the afternoon before, and these were her golden spoils. I remember how the sunbeams caught the flowers, until they seemed to shout of spring, and of all that spring means ; and Elizabeth was standing with the door half open, when Bernard Drake came along the corridor behind her. She turned quickly, and with a smile and eager gesture, held out to him half the great bunch she carried. He took them from her with one of his charming smiles ; but I noticed that two or three other nurses were in the corridor at the moment, and must have seen all that passed, and it flashed through my mind to wonder whether they would misinterpret her spontaneous action. It was all so natural, so frank, so like the woman ! She had a beautiful thing herself. She wanted to share it with a friend. That the friend chanced to be a man, and that tongues might wag accordingly, never I am sure crossed her brain. She had a boyish way of brushing aside what she looked upon as absurd conventionalities ; and she would have thought the questionings in my mind quite absurd.

“ Why can't a man and woman treat each other

in a frank way, without always imagining *doubles entendres*, and things that don't exist?" she asked me almost fiercely one morning, *à propos* of nothing that had gone before!

"The question is, *can* a man and woman treat each other quite as if they both belonged to the same sex?" was my answer. "I fully agree with you that we should aim at *bon camaraderie* between men and women, but I doubt whether we can ever obliterate the sense of difference, which constitutes the subtle charm of sex."

She looked at me gravely, then shook her head, and her mouth set itself in rather an obstinate line.

"I can't bear the idea that a woman has to pretend so much. We are told she must pretend not to care; she must not show her hand; it is her business to blow hot and cold; she should be a huntress. Oh! the whole programme makes me sick, *sick*. I can't bear it."

"My dear, you are simply a boy, a nice gamin," was my placid retort. "You are not the least bit like an ordinary woman!" Whereat she laughed.

"I don't want to be unwomanly," she exclaimed suddenly, as she gathered up the washing utensils and stood looking down at me, a wistfulness in her eyes. "I should hate that. You don't think I am unwomanly?"

"You needn't be afraid," I said. "I am not accusing you of unwomanliness. Heaven forbid." I smiled up into her disturbed face. "You are

absolutely womanly, my dear, no one more so. I am not dreaming of saying you are unwomanly. But you are a boyish woman, if I may create such an anomalous creature ! You have no subtlety or coquetry."

Another incident floats back into my mind.

It was Sunday morning, and the ward wore a Sunday air of peace. The work was finished in good time. Elizabeth had long since done her round of duties, and was passing my bed on her way to the Hospital Chapel when Mr. Drake came in.

" I've come in to dress the boy in Cot 3," he said.

" Nurse Tarbet is on duty," she answered. " I am just going to chapel. I'm so sorry I can't wait. I am bound to go to chapel."

" Say a prayer for me," was his reply, spoken low, and she looked into his eyes and smiled.

Long, long afterwards I learnt that from that day onwards Bernard Drake had always found a place in her prayers ; and he first found a place there on that Sunday morning. I could not at the time visualise her in the chapel ; I had not then seen it. But as I look back to-day, I can quite well picture her sitting amongst the other lady pupils in the front seat of the gallery, because before I came away from St. Matthias', I attended service in chapel, one Sunday morning. It was a square ugly building, flanking the hospital courtyard : a building of Georgian date, plain both outside and

inside, where galleries ran round three of its sides. I sat downstairs, and from my seat I could catch a glimpse of Elizabeth, in the right hand gallery. I remember the text that was illuminated all round the brown wall, "And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes"; and I remember how clearly I could hear Elizabeth's voice, as we sang the familiar old hymn, "Brief life is here our portion."

Her voice had in it an arresting quality, it carried well; and I always enjoyed the services occasionally held by the chaplain in our ward, when Elizabeth led the singing, and made me forget to sing myself, it was such a pleasure to listen to her.

All through the days of that spring, I watched what I felt sure was a beautiful idyll; I looked at those two who seemed to be stepping on towards an enchanted land. Elizabeth grew very dear to me; and at the end of May, when I was allowed to leave the hospital, she promised to come often to see me. The difference in our ages made no difference to our friendship.

"What are twelve years?" she said lightly. "You needn't talk nonsense about being middle-aged. I don't consider that forty is middle-age, and even if it is, you are not one of the people who will sink into elderliness of mind! You and elderliness are incompatible terms. I believe you have drunk the Elixir of perpetual youth, and I shall come to you for the recipe. I have the most

complete certainty that it is in our own hands to stay young if we choose. We just must not *allow* ourselves to grow old. Of course I am not talking about our bodies. Poor silly things! I suppose they are bound by and bye to show some traces of age; but our minds never need. It is our own fault if we let our minds grow old. They ought to stay young for ever and ever. Amen."

CHAPTER III

ONLY FRIENDSHIP

AFTER I was discharged from the hospital, the doctors sent me to the seaside, and it was many months before I again saw Elizabeth. She was naturally very busy in her full hospital life ; her letters were few and far between, and gave me very little real information about her ; and not until I was once more settled in my flat in town, did we have any opportunity to meet.

And when that time came, it was again late April ; nearly a year since I had said good-bye to her at the gates of St. Matthias. The trees I could see from my windows were showing tiny green buds ; in the parks the tulips were abloom ; and in my sitting-room I had some of the flowers growing in bowls. I remember that on that April day, Elizabeth came into my room with a great bunch of violets in her hand ; and a smile that seemed to belong to spring-time upon her face. It was good to see her again ; and she seemed to bring with her the same sense of gladness which I had marked about her, in the days when I was a hospital patient.

"Do you realise it is very nearly a year since I saw you?" she said, and I loved her voice, just as I had loved it the first time it sounded in my ears, "you have been away from town an unconscionable time! But you look a very different person from the one I dressed to go away from St. Matthias!"

"I feel a very different person. All these months of idleness have made me fat and well-liking; I never had so much leisure before, and I am starving for work. I am now going to plunge into it with renewed zest after this long, long idleness."

"Into what work do you mean to plunge, you energetic person?"

She sat down upon my fender stool, a favourite seat of hers, as I afterwards found, and looked up at me with a smile.

"What work? Oh, varieties. A Girls' Club in East London; a Boys' Club in the Boro'; a women's meeting closer at hand, and a few other odds and ends; but I don't want to talk about my resuscitated labours; they are quite ordinary, and everyday. Tell me about St. Matthias, and yourself, and everybody."

"Everybody flourishes like green bay trees. The daily round, the common task go on as before," she answered gaily, "and we are all still spread out like beetles and butterflies by our fellow nurses. All our little actions are noticed, and commented on, and magnified by powerful magnifying glasses:

we are supposed to do a great many things we never dream of doing, and so on, *ad infinitum* ! ”

“ One needs to walk warily in a hospital,” I said.

“ One does indeed,” she said emphatically, “ we are under close inspection all the time. Nobody who has not been in hospital, realises how minute the inspection is. We live in glass cases for all the world to see. I am doing Assistant Matron now, by the way, just for a time, and finding it quite interesting.”

I asked various questions about sisters, nurses and dressers, and wound up with the words :

“ And Mr. Drake, how is he ? ”

“ Flourishing like the rest of the bay trees,” there was a touch of flippancy in her voice, “ only he isn’t the least bit of a bay tree,” she added, “ no one would ever expect to go by and find he was gone. There is a stay-put element in his character.”

“ That I can quite believe,” I spoke with heartiness. About Bernard Drake there was something which had appealed to me : he had found a very soft corner in my heart, and I had never forgotten his smile.

“ He is very well, and very busy. He is a house surgeon now,” my visitor went on, “ he and I are great friends, you know,” she added abruptly.

“ I know ; I remember. You were great friends last year. Has the friendship deepened ? ”

Was it fancy, or did a shadow cloud her eyes for

a moment? It seemed to me there was a reckless note in her voice, when she began to speak again.

"I don't think we could be greater friends than we are," she said. Then she got up from the fender stool, and moved restlessly about the room; touching my tulips with tender fingers; glancing at the pictures on the walls; picking up a book and putting it down again; finally bringing up beside the window through which she could see the budding trees, for from my fifth floor flat I had a great view of other people's gardens, and even of distant hills.

"Do you think it is wrong for a man and woman to kiss each other?" she said suddenly, "even though they are only friends?"

I did not answer her at once. My thoughts flew to somebody who had asked me that same question only a few days earlier—somebody big, and masterful, and very dear; and I brought my wandering thoughts back with something of a wrench to Elizabeth.

"Not wrong," I said, "wrong is too big a word to use. I doubt whether kissing is very *expedient*, if the friendship is not going to deepen into something greater than friendship; there is always a risk——"

"Why?" she asked, with a little fierce note in her voice, "what can it matter? Why should there be risks? If we, I mean if two friends care for each other very much, surely it is natural that they should want to kiss?"

"It may be natural. Because a habit is natural, its wisdom does not automatically follow; sometimes natural things are not altogether *wise*," I said. "Is it impertinent to ask whether your questions have any personal application?"

"Not impertinent, no, certainly not," she came back from her restless wandering, and planted herself once more on my fender stool. "I think—I should like to tell you all about it," she added after a pause.

"I should like to hear," was my response, "and remember, I am not, at least I hope I am not, early Victorian, and prudish. I can see things from a broad standpoint."

"I am sure you are not prudish and silly; and you know *I* am quite unconventional, and unorthodox; perhaps un-everything I ought to be," she ended, with again that touch of recklessness. "Bernard Drake and I have been friends for more than a year—very great friends. Sometimes we go out together—there's no harm in that, is there?" she shot the words at me with a sort of defiance, and I answered.

"No harm at all. You mean he takes you out to tea, or something of that kind?"

"Yes, but much nicer things than that," a charming smile played about her lips. "We have been once or twice to Richmond Park, for the whole afternoon, and once out to Rickmansworth, just to walk, and have tea there in a dear little inn. And

last week, we sat in a little dell in Richmond Park, such a lovely little place, where the hawthorns will soon be in flower, and a thrush was singing; and when we got up to come away, he kissed me."

I looked at her softly flushed face, and shining eyes.

"I don't wonder that he did," I said, "and I hope——"

"But we are only friends," she broke in, "there has never been a word between us of anything but friendship."

"Friendship makes a very good stepping-stone," I answered, but she only said with a shake of the head: "I wonder," and then changed the subject, so that I felt I could not pursue it.

In those days Elizabeth seemed to me like a person only partially developed. I mean the expression in no derogatory way, but she was developing slowly; she had matured late. There was still much of the child about her; or rather, to hold to my original simile, she reminded me of a boy, just a nice frank boy, quite guiltless of feminine subtlety, or even feminine knowledge. It is my only way of accounting for all that came after. I am not sure that I should ever have thought this problem out for myself if Miles had not helped me, and it is at this particular point that Miles himself comes into my story. I do not mean that he only entered my life at that particular moment. I had known him for a long time, but it was at this point

that he and I—— But I must write the story down in more or less orderly sequence.

I had first met Miles Hanley in Switzerland, two years earlier, and because some affinity of taste drew us together, we became friends; very close friends. Then he went to India for a year, to carry out research work with a doctor friend (he himself was a medical man); and only a fortnight before that April visit of Elizabeth's, he had come back to England. During the past year letters had carried our friendship many steps further; but I think even so, I was not quite prepared to find how many steps it had carried him. I know that surprise was my dominating sensation, when he came striding into my little sitting-room on a March afternoon, put his arms round me, and said, very much as Elizabeth said to me a fortnight later:

“Do you think it is wrong for a man and woman friend to kiss?”

I merely gasped as he put me away from him, and looked down into my face, with laughing eyes, that held something which quickened my heart beats. His kiss had already brought the colour into my face, and I could only stare at him speechlessly, wondering what answer to give to his amazing question.

“Anyhow, you don't think it wrong of *me* to kiss you,” he questioned, a mixture of wistfulness and triumph in his voice, “you can't possibly think anything so absurd as that?”

"Would it be absurd? You—you rather swept me off my feet."

"I'm glad to hear it! Well, is it wrong to have kissed you?" he repeated impetuously, the eternal boy peeping out in him, as it does in every man who is a real man.

"I don't know," I answered, "I suppose friends——"

"Anyhow, whether it's wrong or not I couldn't help it," he put in quickly, "besides which, do we want to stop short at friendship? Who says we must do anything so silly? I don't want to do any stopping short. I want to go right on. I have realised it now for weeks and weeks. I want to go on!"

He still held his hands upon my shoulders, and looked at me with laughing tender eyes. By this time I am convinced my face must have been the colour of a full-blown peony; and my eyes could no longer meet his.

"But you, but I——" I began with the haziest notion of how I intended to finish the sentence, "you see——"

"I see that we are going to settle this question straight away now, out of hand," was his masterful retort, "we have come to cross roads; and I intend to have the whole thing definitely settled now, once for all. The cross roads have been reached."

"Cross roads?" I felt feebly unable to do anything but repeat his words.

"Yes, cross roads," his voice was very firm. "We have come to a place where we must either go on, or stop altogether. I don't want friendship any more! I want to go on to the something bigger than friendship."

"To go on?" Again I could only play the part of echo, and he laughed softly.

"I want you to marry me, my dear; I made up my mind to that fact, ages and ages ago. You have been a charming, a most delightful comrade, but I am not satisfied. I don't feel like sticking to friendship only. I want you for my wife!"

"But I'm over forty," I ejaculated weakly.

"I don't care if you're a hundred and forty," he retorted. "What on earth does it matter how old you are? Good heavens! I'm not such a callow youth myself. I'm over forty-five remember, and anyhow, I repeat, what does it signify? If we care about each other, isn't that all that matters? I care so much for you, that I can't do without you any longer, that is what it comes to. But do you care enough for me to cross the rubicon, and marry me? Will you enter with me on the great adventure?"

"I don't feel as if it would be too great an adventure with you," I answered rather shakily, with a feeling that my universe had suddenly turned upside down, and was standing on its nether end! "But I thought I was a confirmed old maid."

"Oh, you thought you were a confirmed old maid,

did you ? ” His laugh was good to hear. “ Then I beg to differ from you entirely. You are nothing of the sort. I say again, what on earth does age matter ? Are we to let youth grab all the best of everything for itself ? ”

“ I don’t exactly see why we should,” I laughed rather shakily ; and Miles’ arm went round me, and drew me close, “ after all, we older people still have hearts to—to——”

“ To love with,” Miles put in. “ Of course we have—hearts to love with, and many years to love I hope. Years in which you and I will live our lives together.”

Thus it had come about that by the time Elizabeth paid me her April visit, and asked me that question about kissing, Miles and I had gathered up our friendship into the bond that is greater than friendship. Indeed, we had actually fixed our wedding day ; but I did not tell Elizabeth this until a week later, when again she came to see me.

When she heard my news, she was full of eager sympathy and interest. It was always Elizabeth’s way to be eagerly sympathetic over the joys and sorrows of her friends ; but underlying that eager sympathy of hers, I fancied I detected a hint of wistful longing.

“ You are going to be married soon ? ” she asked, “ and will you leave this beloved flat ? What a pity ! ” She turned to look out of the window at my very satisfying view.

"We think of being married early in June," I answered her, "and—yes, I must leave this beloved flat, as you justly call it. I am dreadfully sorry to give it up, but it can't be helped. Miles, Dr. Hanley, has a house in Ashmore Street."

"He is a doctor then?"

"Yes, he is a doctor, but he doesn't really practise much now. He is chiefly doing research work; and he must be more in the centre of things than I am here. So we shall keep his Ashmore Street house. Deborah is going with me there, I am glad to say."

"I can't imagine you without Deborah! Does she approve of your marrying? She doesn't altogether give me the impression that she would look on it with whole-hearted approval."

"She does not altogether approve," I laughed. "Deborah has a wholesome contempt for the male sex; she thinks a mere man is a poor sort of creature. I fancy she thinks I am rather lowering my dignity in allowing myself to be, as she puts it, 'under a man's thumb.' Her view of husbands is a little crude. She looks upon them as tyrants, who keep their wives in subjection, and well-disciplined. I believe she imagines that I shall turn into a well-kept doormat, or a carefully trained Griselda."

For a moment Elizabeth sat silent on the fender stool, contemplating me gravely. Then she said, suddenly and surprisingly:

"I suppose you have the 'come hither look' in the eye."

"My dear Elizabeth, why? What an accusation to launch at a harmless and quite well-behaved female! *I*—the come hither look? 'Lawk a mercy,' as that funny old scrubber at St. Matthias' used to say."

"I was not making an accusation, it's—it's more like an outburst of envy," she exclaimed vehemently, "you've got something I have not got, and I should like to have it; oh, how I should like to have it!"

"What do you mean?" I questioned quietly, seeing that she was in deadly earnest; and not in the least understanding her.

"I mean that I am just a kind of neuter gender," she said, with a little laugh, that was more rueful than amused. "A man likes me for a friend; he finds me a good comrade, a pleasant pal; but he doesn't want anything more; and I want it all, I want it all." There was passion in her voice, extraordinary passion. I had never before seen her so stirred out of her usual bright boyish manner. "I should like all of life that I can get," she went on, "and I don't know how to get it," she ended with a despairing note in her voice, that went to my heart. "I lack—something. What is it I lack?"

She looked at me so wistfully, that I bent down and kissed her, feeling suddenly sorry that I had waved my great joy in front of her eyes. Yet frankly the whole situation puzzled me. Bernard

Drake obviously liked her friendship ; she meant something of real importance in his life ; why then did he leave it at that ? Why did he not go the one step further, which would, I was certain, bring a new light into her eyes, open for her the gate of her own special Paradise ? What did it all mean ? It was beyond my comprehension.

“ In some ways you haven’t developed as quickly as some women do,” I ventured tentatively. “ Perhaps that is the solution to your puzzle ? ”

“ You mean that I don’t know how to draw men on. No, I don’t. I can only just be myself,” she exclaimed with vehemence. “ I suppose I show too plainly when I like a person : I am not subtle enough ; all my cards are on the table ; I can’t play hot and cold—hold back one minute, lead on the next. Is that where I go wrong ? ”

“ Frankly, I don’t know,” was my answer. Her problem puzzled me ; I really did not know how to answer her. Possibly, in a sense, she was right. Possibly her cards did lie too much under Bernard Drake’s nose, in all their simplicity. Possibly that quality in her of boyish frankness, hid the essential femininity of her character, which I was convinced lay somewhere underneath the boyishness. Only it was not yet developed. That was the point. And would that lack of development hinder the man she loved (for that she loved him there was no doubt) from falling in love with her ?

In plain, ungarnished language it just came to

this—that as far as friendship went, as far as community of interests, and a bond of tastes, went, she and Bernard Drake were perfectly matched: but unless she had the power to arouse him on the passionate side, he would never pass beyond the bounds of friendship. I looked at her helplessly, wondering why her undeniable charm was not charming enough. What was it she lacked? What was it? What was it?

Miles supplied me with the explanation, or at any rate with *an* explanation. After he and Elizabeth had met several times at my flat he gave his masculine opinion of her; that carefully thought out and slow opinion, which represents the balanced reasoning of the man, as against the rapid intuition of the woman.

“Elle n’a pas du chien,” he said, using precisely the words I had heard used about her before—the French term for which I can find no equivalent in English; unless the modern slang “pep,” “ginger,” or “vim,” may be taken as such! “She would make a splendid pal; a wonderful good comrade; but she hasn’t got sex charm.”

“My dear Miles!” I exclaimed, “she is so good to look at—she is altogether such a dear. Are men absolutely blind bats?”

“She hasn’t got sex charm,” Miles repeated, with mild obstinacy. “It isn’t her fault. She just hasn’t got it. I should imagine she has developed late; and I would hazard a guess that she is the

child of a very restrained man, who after a completely controlled youth married late in life."

"What an interesting theory." I stared at Miles' absorbed face.

"Only a theory," he answered, "but quite conceivably a true one. She may later develop the qualities she lacks now; or she may not."

"But she is capable of loving wholeheartedly *now*," I argued.

"Very possibly, but she isn't capable of rousing passion in somebody else, of that I am quite certain," my sage lover retorted, "her temperament probably spells tragedy for her, and nobody will be able to avert the tragedy. But I should say she may still develop—develop much later on; and then she will be infinitely attractive."

How wise his foreboding words were, came back to me only a few months later; and by that time he and I were married, and settled in our new home, whither I had transferred my most treasured pieces of furniture, so that my new den was a sort of twin of the sitting-room in my flat.

On her first visit, Elizabeth looked round it approvingly.

"'Exactly like the same,'" she said. "That was the expression my small sister had a way of using, about anything with a family likeness to something else. 'Exactly like the same,' I say of this room, comparing it with your flat. It feels so nice and familiar."

"I hope it always will be nice and familiar to you! Come to it as often as you like, and can. Sit down on the usual fender stool, and tell me all your doings."

"I've had a holiday with Nurse Dorothy. We went to the sea, and the gorse was in bloom almost down to the beach, a small late-flowering gorse; and the sea was like a shield of silver, spread out under a very blue sky; and the world was full of summer——" she broke off abruptly. I saw an expression of pain in her eyes.

"You didn't altogether enjoy it? Something spoiled your holiday?" I drew a bow at a venture, but the arrow hit its mark.

"I enjoyed it," she said, "but—I've realised that what I told you is true: I'm a neuter gender. A man wants my friendship—only that. All right," she went on with a kind of defiance, "he shall have my friendship—good measure, pressed down, and running over."

"Have you——" I began, but she interrupted me.

"It was so tremendously honest of him," she said. "He didn't want me to misunderstand anything. He, Bernard is the most honest person I ever met. He wrote and told me quite simply and plainly, that he wants only my friendship; that he is—awfully fond of me, and would like us always to be the greatest of friends. But that is all he wants. Nothing more."

"My dear!" They were the only two words

that came to my lips, because I could not bear the look in her eyes.

"It's all right," she answered, with again that note of defiance, "I've—played up to him. I've told him that I only want friendship too"—she lifted her head rather proudly—"I've written it down in black and white that I don't want to be his wife"—I nearly exclaimed "*My dear*" again, but I refrained—"he says he is often dreadfully lonely, and if he needs me for a friend he shall have me."

There was a sort of challenge in words and tone, as though she were arguing down some opposition she sensed in me.

"Just friends—platonic friends?" I questioned, and her eyes met mine fully. In them, too, there was the same challenging defiance as in her voice.

"I see no reason, neither does Bernard, why we should not kiss each other, if we are such great friends," she said.

I hesitated. Out of my newly found knowledge, as Miles Hanley's wife, I hesitated. Could they kiss and remain "just friends"? Would the man's kiss be one of pure affection, not calculated to rouse either in himself, or her, any deeper sentiment? Or would he set her aflame? And if he did not include himself in the conflagration, would he make her suffer the torments of hell, whilst he went off scot free? Bernard Drake was a good man, one of the best men it has ever been my lot to know.

He was also a man of great simplicity, with little or no knowledge of a woman and her complexities. If he really believed that Elizabeth's affection ran along the same lines as his for her (and I am convinced he did believe this at that time), then he would look upon kissing as an innocent and harmless expression of friendship. But——

My thoughts came to an abrupt end at that word "but." I felt that I had come to a cul-de-sac, bounded by a wall, over which I could not see. I only feared for Elizabeth, and for Elizabeth's happiness; but my tentative words of warning fell upon deaf ears.

"I would rather be his friend, than the wife of any other man," she said, proudly, not realising, I believe, how much of her heart she was showing me in those pathetic words. "I thought it all out, as I sat looking over the sea, on the common where the gorse was all ablaze. I am doing it with my eyes open."

Doing it with her eyes open? Dear Heart! Her eyes were as much opened, as a kitten's eyes at a day old; and I could do nothing. Only her words echoed in my brain, until the pathos of them made my own heart ache.

"I would rather be his friend, than the wife of any other man."

CHAPTER IV

PARTED

A YEAR and more of travelling, and of helping Miles with his research work, once more took me out of reach of Elizabeth ; and it must have been a year, if not more than a year, before we met again. In the interval she had written me a few post cards, and one or two rather meagre letters ; but they gave me no news of the inner Elizabeth, only of her outer doings. She had left St. Matthias', and first of all, she was for a time in a provincial hospital ; then she was doing odd jobs ; and finally, by the time I was once more in England, she was training in a well-known maternity hospital.

It was from there that she came to see me, and again curiously enough it was on an April day. April and Elizabeth are very much tangled up together in my mind ! The day on which she came, was one which for sheer loveliness might have been picked out of flaming June. It was unforgettable. But that year was altogether a year of wonderful weather ; summer went on in unbroken loveliness

from February till September ; a year we shall surely always remember !

Directly Elizabeth greeted me, I knew that there was something wrong, something very gravely wrong. She was as dear and affectionate to me as ever : her manner was bright ; there was nothing despondent about her : she did not appear to be in the least depressed, but her eyes gave her away. She could not hide the hunger in her eyes. I had the feeling that they were perpetually looking for something lost : and there was a pain in them which nothing could hide. You can hide everything else, but you cannot cover up the expression of your eyes !

Elizabeth talked gaily, and I knew it was courage that gave that gaiety to her voice and smile, as she chattered to me of her new work. Her whole gallant bearing seemed to wave aloft the flag of courage.

" I love the babies," she said, " there is something deliciously comforting about a baby ; I don't know why, but a baby fills up gaps."

" Are there gaps to fill up ? " I asked, adding before she could answer, " there are lots of gaps in your life during all these months for you to fill up, Elizabeth. I feel as if I knew nothing about you, excepting the barest bones of fact. I know where you have been, and what you have been doing, but that is all. Your letters leave a very great deal to be desired."

"I've told you of all my movements," she answered. "I got some very good experience in the provinces, really very good: my district work in Town later was helpful too. Then I thought I would add maternity work to my other training; and so it is being added; I find it most interesting, and I love the babies."

"And you yourself? What about Elizabeth behind the mask?" I probed. "You know quite well you are sitting behind a mask."

"The Elizabeth behind the mask lives a day at a time, and tries to live it with all her might," she quoted, "but she's not really behind a mask; that is only a momentary pose!" With a suddenly impulsive movement she left the armchair in which she sat, she discarded the fender stool on this wonderful April day when fires were superfluous, and knelt beside me, laying her hands over mine. "I don't want to get behind masks for you, whatever I may do for the rest of the world: only—I am not very clever about telling you things straight out: in cold blood! I—I think I'm shy. Ask me any question you like, and I will answer it; only don't expect me to begin all on my own. I *want* you to know everything, but I can't plunge into explanations, straight off my own bat. It is part of my odd idiosyncrasy, but I can't."

"Then, may I ask, quite crudely, what has happened about Bernard Drake, and about your friendship? Did your scheme work? I have so

often thought of you both, so often wanted to know whether you carried your plan through."

She did not wince. She only laughed—a tiny little laugh that hurt me.

"I expect you knew all along that our scheme was unworkable," she said, "in fact you practically told me so, only I didn't want to believe you. A friendship like Bernard's and mine, can only go on being platonic, if neither party to the covenant stops being platonic; otherwise, disaster is bound to happen. I was never platonic, you know that?" I bent my head in assent. "We went on for a little while on the lines we had laid down," her voice sounded to me oddly monotonous, "and I—would have given him anything he wanted, anything, I practically told him so. I was reckless enough to have given him my whole life. He could have had it all, *everything*. I couldn't bear that he should be lonely, and I knew he was a lonely man. But he—— Oh, well he knew that if we went further than we had already gone, the position would be impossible; that he could not take what I offered. He told me then that we must end it all: make a clean cut: part altogether. I don't know, I suppose I never shall know, why, caring for me as much as he did, he still did not care for me enough to wish to marry me. I think when he was young he met a woman whom he had never forgotten. I have an idea that may have been the truth. If

he ever meets her again he will marry her; if not, well—anyhow he does not want to marry *me*! But he was fond enough of me to realise that our friendship—on non-platonic lines—was becoming a danger for both of us. When he put it to me in that way, I saw that he was right. We could not have gone on as we were doing, without going further; and he was wise enough to know that the step further was just the step we must not take.”

“My dear, you could not possibly have taken any position less than that of wife,” I said gravely.

“Couldn’t I?” she stirred restlessly, her voice was reckless. “Isn’t half a loaf sometimes better than no bread?” She flung the question at me fiercely.

“Some half loaves only turn to dust and ashes,” I answered. “If you had chosen that particular half loaf you would have found no lasting joy, either for yourself or him. You would only have found bitterness and regret.”

“Why?”

“Because, my dear, such a position must either have involved continual subterfuge, intrigue, concealment, which are foreign both to you and to Mr. Drake; or, if you had chosen to blazon out your relationship before the eyes of the world, it would have meant social ostracism, which would have been intolerable to you, and ruin to his career. Whereas now——”

“Yes, whereas now,” she interrupted, her voice

on edge with sarcasm, "what do I get now? Emptiness. The best friendship of my life has gone; the greatest thing I ever had is taken from me! My arms that might have held children of their own are empty, empty, empty; and I love little children! My heart that might have had its own man, is empty too; I have 'gone empty away,'" she ended upon a note that was like an exceeding bitter cry.

"You are quite wrong," I said after a moment of silence. "In one sense the emptiness is there, I grant it. In another sense, no. You carry with you the sense of an abiding and beautiful friendship, which nothing has spoilt; which nothing can harm; the essence of which can never be taken away from you. The beauty and the greatness of it will stay with you all your life. Because you have both chosen the heights, you will find the greatness and the beauty will make your lives great and beautiful. Blessedness is greater than happiness; and you two have chosen blessedness."

"In the depths of my heart I know you are right," she said, after a long, long pause. "Bernard meant what you mean, even though he didn't put it quite in those words. But—he said, we could help each other, even if we never met again; and I know he meant that the better we each make our individual lives, the better we shall each make the other's life."

"He was quite right," I murmured softly.

"He came to say good-bye," she went on as though she had not heard me. "I made him promise to let us meet again, after he made his final decision. It was in April, last April, when you were away. I was staying with friends who live amongst the downs; and he came to see me just for the day; and he and I went for a long walk across the downs. The larks were singing all the time, and the sun shone——"

For an instant there was a break in her voice, but she collected her forces, and went on; and again I loved her for her courage.

"There was a little copse on the top of the downs, the dog violets were in flower, amongst the brown leaves on the ground; and here and there was a primrose. We sat there and talked, and I watched the violets sway in the air that came rustling amongst the hazels; and the primroses smelt very sweet. I don't ever want to see a dog violet again, or to hear the song of the larks! He told me quite plainly, quite simply, that it was only friendship he felt for me, there was no passion in it. You see I was right, I am just a neuter gender. I am just like a stupid boy. I can't awaken a man's real love! But he cared for me enough to kiss me; he cared enough for me for that! And we said good-bye up there on the downs, whilst the larks sang and sang, until I could have shrieked to them to be silent. And

now, he has gone to the Antipodes ; he has gone there to take up work at the back of beyond ; and I shall never hear of him again. He has gone out of my life for ever."

"Nothing goes out of your life, that has been in it as he was in it," I said with decision. "His influence remains. His friendship remains. He will never forget you. He was right when he said you can still help each other ; he will never go out of your life."

"Oh ! I know—I know that is fundamentally true. You are right, and he was right," she cried passionately, springing suddenly to her feet and standing up. "I try to hold on to that knowledge. I try all the time to hold on to that. And now I've finished my lamentations. I am sane again." She lifted her hands for a moment above her head, as though she were thrusting aside some incubus. "I wanted to pour it all out to you, but I am not spending my days in regrets ; believe me I am not howling my life away ! I went straight to work at once, and I have never stopped working ; and you and Bernard are both right—eternally right. Don't you think I know it with the better side of me ? It is only that sometimes the flesh is weak, and I feel as if the pain was more than I could bear. It isn't really more than I can bear," she added, with a smile that made my eyes misty and my throat choky. "It's simply marvellous how much one can bear, by putting one's back

into it ! And thank God for the babies," was the end of her sentence.

" You find your work amongst them congenial ? "

" I think I should almost find any work congenial," she said, " the harder the work, the better I like it. But the babies have such healing fingers ! They do me good, and I like to feel their soft little bodies in my arms. They help me. Last Sunday I was in the Labour Ward all the morning—Easter Day. There is a church next to the hospital, and whilst we were helping a new life to come into the world, the congregation next door was singing the Easter hymn. Bernard was with us one Easter, staying with my people at the old Rectory in Cornwall. He and I went to church together, and I sang the Easter hymn standing by his side. The Easter hymn seems all mixed up with him ; and he is mixed up with the pear tree that was in blossom in the Rectory garden—very white against a blue sky. There is no pear tree near the maternity hospital ; but the sky was very blue on Easter Day, and somehow I remembered the whiteness of the pear blossom, and the country loveliness of that other Easter. Easter and Bernard will always be linked in my mind."

" A great linking," I responded, " seeing that Easter, whether you are Christian or Pagan—whether you believe in the glory of a Resurrection, or the entry of the sun into the Summer Solstice—must inevitably mean a beginning again, a new

life. It is wonderful to link that thought up with the thought of a beautiful friendship."

"You have such a nice helpful way of putting things," she said, "and now I am not proposing to say one single word more about my selfish self. You will give me a true and unvarnished account of your travels and researchings, and tell me how many noxious bugs Dr. Miles has discovered; and what diseases they are going to hand on to poor humanity; or avert from poor humanity!"

To all I told her of our wanderings and work, she listened with genuine interest. Elizabeth was always genuinely interested in her fellow-creatures, and their doings; though I do not know why I say she "*was*" interested. She "*is*" interested. Thank God! Elizabeth is still in this dear old world, to take a hand in making the crooked straight, and the rough places plain; and I hope the world will keep her with it for many and many a long day.

"What are your own plans when you have finished your maternity training?" I asked her, when I had exhausted the story of our roamings. "Have you settled anything about your future?"

"Very much so. Everything is cut and dried. I am to take charge of a hospital in India. That was the reason why I was anxious to get a thorough maternity experience. I shall be away from England a long time, working my hardest. But some day I shall come back and settle down into

leisured spinsterdom ; somewhere in this beloved old country, probably in this beloved old town. I am a cockney at heart. I like to be within measurable distance of Bow bells ; and you may expect me to become a permanent Londoner, when my work in the East is done."

I saw her several times that summer, for she remained in town "brushing up," as she called it, at more than one hospital, preparatory to her departure for the East ; but she never again alluded to Bernard Drake, nor to her own pain. She never "let go" again, if I may make use of an expression which seems to fit the case. She was invariably bright and keen about her work ; equally keen about our work and our busy lives ; and there was never a trace of bitterness in any word she uttered. Once, only once, did I invade the sacred places of her soul. On the occasion of her last visit to me before she sailed, on a mild autumn afternoon when my room was adorned with great branches of orange beech leaves, and sweet with the scent of violets, I said to her :

"Elizabeth, I think it is wonderful of you never to be bitter."

She opened her eyes widely, and a little elusive smile crossed her lips.

"*Bitter ?*" she said. "But why should I be bitter ? Bitterness spoils all love, hurts all life. Out of all the pain, I have learnt that my love for Bernard, is the most beautiful thing I have

ever had: and I must weave it into all I think, and do, and am. He is the best man I have ever known, and his goodness is helping me. If I were bitter, I should spoil all that need never be spoiled. The better, the more unselfish, the purer I am, the more I conquer evil, the more I shall help him: I know for certain he was right about that. God keep us always from bitterness! It hurts the very heart of love," she ended, with strange fervour.

It was this particular memory of Elizabeth, strong, and of a good courage, that I carried back to London with me, after I had waved good-bye to her, as the great liner slowly swung away from the quay, and sailed out into the sunset. The water lay about the ship like a sea of glass; away in the west, the sky flamed golden; the masts were very black against the golden glory, as the moorings were slipped, and the big vessel glided swiftly, and ever more swiftly away, carrying Elizabeth out of my sight for many and many a long day.

CHAPTER V

AT BRANCHESTER

WHEN I married Miles I had imagined that we should be securely settled in Ashmore Street for the rest of our natural lives: and in that faith, not to say certainty, I moved most of my "little bits of things" from my flat to the house which was, I imagined, to be our permanent home. But I had entirely reckoned without my host, or rather without a husband who had given himself over to research work.

We had only been settled in our new house just over six months when we were despatched to a remote corner of Europe. I say "we"; but naturally I was not despatched anywhere. It was Miles who was at the beck and call of Science, and when Miles went I packed up my traps and went with him, leaving behind, in charge of our establishment, a sorrowful Deborah. She had never quite reconciled herself, firstly to my marrying at all, secondly to what she considered my foolishly unnecessary wish to be with my husband wherever he went. Poor old Deborah!

She really never fully forgave me for having quitted the state of single blessedness. She could never understand how any sensible woman could surrender her independence to a man; and that the woman should, furthermore, go with that mere man into outlandish foreign places, when she might have remained at home in a comfortable and decorous London house, was to her unspeakably strange!

But Miles and I had found each other late in life; and now that we had come together, we did not wish to waste any precious time. I do not think either of us felt we could see too much of each other; and Miles no more thought of leaving me behind when he went researching, than I thought of being left behind. We blissfully imagined that, our nine months of wandering ended, we should settle down once more, and this time for good and all, in our Ashmore Street home. But, as so often happens, again in our own person we exemplified the truth of the old saying. For us, as for others, the best-laid plans "went agley." And instead of finding ourselves established in Ashmore Street, we went into the provinces to live, at any rate for a time, in the old cathedral town of Branchester.

Miles was offered an important post in connection with the local hospital. Many opportunities would occur there for his special line of research; and so with a good deal of regret, we let our London abode,

and betook ourselves to the historic city, which lies amongst downs and water meadows, in a dignified peace peculiarly its own. By great good fortune we were able to rent a house in the cathedral precincts; a house of which Deborah most providentially approved, with a garden which rejoiced Miles' heart and mine.

I have more than once heard him say: "The cathedral practically sits upon our lawn!" And so in effect it did. Our lawn ran right up to the east end of the glorious building; and beyond the lawn lay the sheet of water which is so characteristic a part of Branchester's loveliness. From our garden a private path skirted that delicious piece of water, and it always pleased me to walk by our private path into the town. Though longer, it had a charm of its own, and I loved the reflection of the cathedral towers in the sheet of blue water; the trees that dipped into it from the banks; the flowers that sprang up in the grass with such an air of spontaneous growing.

When finally we had to go back to town, I left quite a large part of my heart in Branchester; and as I write, I can see again the downs, soft and green and shapely, circling round it, as the hills stand about Jerusalem. I can see the water meadows at their base, very green and luscious, criss-crossed by little bubbling streams, that keep them eternally fresh. I can smell the sweetness of the lime tree blossoms hanging in yellow-green

clusters on the limes, that make a stately avenue, to the west door of the cathedral. I can hear the melodious voices of the rooks circling about the elms in our garden, or flying across the meadows in the sunset light; and the jackdaws' harsher notes about the grey pile of the cathedral itself. And I am back again in Branchester, with its strange mixture of the mediæval and the modern; its yet stranger mingling of petty scandal, and noble endeavour.

Branchester gave me my first intimate knowledge of a small provincial town; and I found much to amuse me; much to sadden; much upon which to reflect. Everybody who could aspire to be anybody in the place called upon us; and I learnt something of the etiquette, and barriers, and social standards of such a town.

When I lived in Branchester, the barriers between different sections of the community were curiously rigid; and to a Londoner like myself, and a somewhat Bohemian Londoner at that, they seemed as remarkable, as they were rigid. It appeared that Society with a large S, consisted of the cathedral clergy; the officers of the garrison; and a proportion of the leisured dwellers in the place who had come there with some sort of introduction. But to that Society (with a big S) the solicitors, the wine merchants, the house agents, and so on were not admitted, whilst the tradespeople had neither part nor lot at all in the social life as Society understood it!

The medical profession had originally sat on the fringe of the two first named groups ; it was now admitted into the number of the elect ; and to Miles and me, by virtue I suppose of the distinguished position he had occupied in Town, the hand of fellowship was cordially extended. Even the county called upon us, and I was given to understand that this was an honour usually only accorded to the Dean, and the Colonel commanding the regiment quartered in the town !

All these points were sources of unending amusement to me and to Miles ; and I may add to the bishop's wife, who very quickly became our chief friend in Branchester. Elizabeth said long afterwards, that my letters from the ancient city sometimes made her feel as if I were like Sterne's starling, saying "I want to get out." But I did not precisely feel imprisoned. I only felt occasionally a great desire (which I usually gratified) to walk up to the top of the downs, and spread out my arms wide, and drink the fresh air into my lungs, whilst my eyes drank in the wide view !

For the rest, I found many joys in that city of gardens, where as the spring days fled by, the whole place was fragrant with the sweetness first of lilac, and then of hawthorn and laburnum : where the great spaces of the cathedral never failed to give me a sense of brooding peace and sanctity ; where the downs with their gracious austerity, made so perfect a setting for the grey

mass of the big church, and the soft redness of the Elizabethan houses.

The house in which we lived pleased me. The walls were oak-panelled; some of the floors were uneven; up and down the wide shallow steps of the staircase men and women of many generations must have passed; and the furniture suited the house itself. The rooms we chiefly used faced south over the garden; and the sun shone royally into them, whenever there was sunshine at all! And to me, as to Miles, there was real joy in looking out at the grey cathedral, with its feet so to speak upon our lawn!

During our first weeks in Branchester, exploring the place and receiving visitors were my chief occupations, and the instruction and interest I got from the one pursuit was well balanced by the amusement I found in the other. I met types of men and women (chiefly women) such as it had never been my lot to come across before. By some I was examined and cross-examined, with a thoroughness which would have done credit to a King's counsel! By others, I was asked to help this work, or join that association, until I became bewildered by the multifarious Guilds and Societies with which the town seemed to abound.

By yet another section I was hailed as a Londoner, who would infuse fresh life into what the smart wife of a certain Major Fisher called, "This stagnant hole." Well, I did not feel called upon to infuse

anything special into Branchester, which was moreover, far from being a stagnant hole. On the contrary, it showed healthy signs of life and vigour; nor did I join all the societies to which I might have added my name.

I begged for breathing space! I said I should like to be six months in the place, before I decided definitely what I would do in the way of work or self-improvement; and I intended to use that six months, in studying my environment, and learning what its constituents really were. Sometimes I longed for Elizabeth, to share my amusement in secret with me. One could always rely upon her sense of humour! But Elizabeth had vanished into the unknown; at least, to be quite accurate, she had taken up her post in India, and only an occasional post-card reached me, to tell me she was still in the land of the living, and still my friend. Miles and I meanwhile extracted from Branchester all the good and all the quaint which we found there, and added them to our slowly growing store; both of us being completely convinced that every atom of knowledge and experience the human being acquires, enriches his or her personality for time and for Eternity.

CHAPTER VI

ROSEMARY

THE bishop's wife sat curled up on the window seat. I am afraid the sentence smacks of comic opera, but the fact remains a sober and precise fact !

When I called upon Mrs. Denton, the wife of Bishop Denton, I found her seated upon the wide window seat in her drawing-room, a book upon her lap, a brindled wire-haired terrier seated close beside her. She was on her feet before I had crossed the width of the drawing-room, which divided us ; and her eager welcome sent a little glow of warmth to my heart. It was so completely lacking in formality and convention ; just as she was totally lacking in any of the characteristics which I had presupposed would belong to her, as the wife of a bishop !

I had been out when she called upon me ; she had been away since then, thus it chanced that we had never met ; but in the way common to all of us, I had formed a mental picture of what she would be like. I had expected to see a portly

dame, probably buxom, certainly middle-aged; decorously dressed in black; with neatly dressed, very smooth hair, and possibly a cap. I saw instead—

Just for a moment I lay down my pen, and shut my eyes, that I may visualise Rosemary Denton again, as I first saw her on that afternoon when I was nearer fifty than forty, and she was still in the flower of her youth! She was just a slip of a girl. That was so quaint, a bishop's wife, and yet, a mere slip of a girl, slender and graceful; not bearing the faintest resemblance to the portly dame of my imagination. A girl whose fair hair made exactly the right crown for her delicately tinted face, tinted by nature not by art, and coloured with the sort of dainty colouring which nature has painted also in wild roses, and apple blossom. Her eyes were grey, that shade of grey which merges itself into a soft green, and they had a way of deepening and darkening, which was very attractive. They were also fringed with dark lashes, several shades darker than her hair, which added to their attraction, and Rosemary Denton's smile was one of the sweetest I have ever seen. There was such warmth of welcome in its quality; such real loving-kindness. It gave one a feeling of being greeted as a friend, straight away.

That was the attitude of the Bishop's wife to all the world, simple, loving friendliness. She gave out of herself all the time ungrudgingly, open-heartedly;

and if ever those words of Ruskin were true of any living woman they were true of her: "Her feet have touched the meadows, and left the daisies rosy." She left a sense of gladness, of rosiness wherever she passed. Before I had known her long I called her in my own mind "a Pippa of to-day," and I think she fully justified her name.

Her husband was not the Bishop of the diocese, that much I knew before the day in June when we first met. Bishop Denton had been working in Australia; but for some reason, a health reason I believe, he had come back to England, and was made an archdeacon of Branchester. This was the sum of my knowledge about the Dentons, before the sunny afternoon when I walked across the floor of their drawing-room, and Rosemary Denton sprang up from the window seat to greet me. Her dog followed her example, wagging his tail beguilingly, and looking at me with brown eyes that held a welcome, just as did those of his mistress, putting two bronze paws against my knee, in a way which instantly appealed to my heart.

"What a delicious little person!" I exclaimed, stooping to pat his furry head.

"Now I am so glad you say that," Mrs. Denton said, and I liked the eager note in her voice, "some people talk of dogs, as if they belonged to an inferior species. I like to think of them as persons."

"So do I," I laughed. "To me dogs are always folks."

I sat down on the window seat, in preference to the armchair she pushed forward.

"Please let me sit here," I said. "I love your garden, and above all your peep of the downs. How lucky you are to see them!"

"That little bit of distance is one of my best joys," was her response. "I come from a land of big spaces, and sometimes I miss them. That bit of downland I can see from here, makes me remember that the big spaces are not really far away."

"You come from Australia?" my words were a question.

"Yes. Val, my husband, brought me from there. I call myself one of his curios. I think the people of Branchester rather look upon me in that light. I am afraid," she laughed a low, delicious laugh, "I am afraid I am not at all a proper sort of wife for a bishop! Just before you came in, I was remembering the day when Val and I first met. My horse and I were nearly drowned."

"Nearly drowned?"

She nodded. "I wish I could make you see the place. I don't know why I thought of it, especially to-day, because nothing in all the ordered loveliness here, is in the least like it. And yet a little picture of it came popping all at once into my mind. Perhaps it was because of the smell of summer that comes in at the window."

She was right about the smell of summer! There

drifted in to us the mingled fragrances of early roses and pinks, the dear homely Mrs. Sinkins which were massed in the beds below; all that indescribable sweetness of growing things, which seems to belong to early summer.

"There were no roses near the Devil's Ford," my hostess went on dreamily, "and certainly none of those pinks; but there were great bushes of wattle in flower, mimosa you call it, and the trees were a mass of the dear little yellow pussy blossoms, and the air was sweet with their scent. I had not realised that the stream was in flood. Minerva, my horse and I, were nearly carried down among the rocks. It is a place of rocks, grey, and sharp, and rather terrible."

"And the bishop helped you?" I asked, as she paused.

"He wasn't looking very bishoply." Again her laugh rang out. "He wore such funny old clothes, and he was as brown as mahogany; but he came along just in time. I don't know to this day how he managed to get Minerva out of that swirling stream. I felt as if we had been in it for hours and hours, with the water buffeting about us; but of course really it was only a few minutes. Val has a way with horses," she added, "he is very firm, and very gentle."

I had not then seen the bishop at all; he had been away somewhere in the diocese, and his wife's description of him aroused my curiosity. I had,

and have, a passion for human beings; Miles teased me by declaring I only liked them as the butterfly collector likes butterflies, to pin down upon his board. But that is only teasing. My love for, and interest in my kind are not limited to dissecting them, and discovering their failings. They really are "proper studies" to me, as Pope would have it; and I agree with him. "The proper study of mankind is man."

I felt as Mrs. Denton talked, that I should like to make a study of the husband she described as firm and gentle; and I confess that I longed to ask a dozen questions then and there. Why had he married so young a wife? What had been his attraction for her? How had the marriage turned out? All those questions I longed to ask—questions which we so often do long to ask our married acquaintances, and can never gratify our longings! I jumped to the conclusion that this attractive girl was the adoring and submissive wife of a man many years her senior; that she looked up to him with adoring admiration; a conclusion which I might have told myself at once was ridiculous, if I had really grasped the significance of her firmly cut lips, and shapely, decided chin.

"Val actually fell in love with me that day by the ford," she went on, "and in quite a few weeks we were married. All this," she put out her hand towards the view from the window, "all this is like nothing I had ever in my life seen

before ; but something in that little bit of distance you see from the window, something in the sweetness of all the summer smells, brings the old place by the ford back to me. Dr. Drake used to say that smell was a wonderful memory stimulus."

When she mentioned the name of Drake I pricked up my ears, for surely Elizabeth had told me that Bernard Drake had gone to Australia.

"Dr. Drake!" I said. "I wonder whether he is related to a Dr. Bernard Drake I met when I was in St. Matthias' Hospital, some years ago? Though it is an absurd question, for of course Australia is a huge place."

"Yes, a huge place, but there are not so very many people in it—and my Dr. Drake's name is Bernard, so perhaps he *is* the same as yours!"

I leant forward eagerly.

"What is he like?" I asked. "I don't think there could be two men exactly the same as the one I knew. He——" I paused for an expression, and she put in quickly:

"I always thought our Dr. Drake was unique."

Unique? The word seemed just right; and all at once there rose before my eyes the face of Bernard Drake, as I had learnt to know it in his days at St. Matthias'. The fair, clearly cut features; the well-pencilled mouth; the smile that held such infinite charm; in one flashing moment I saw them all, and then I echoed Mrs. Denton's words.

"Unique? Yes—I believe I always thought too

that Bernard Drake was unique. There was something unusual about him, a sort of——” It was my turn to hesitate for a word, and at once she supplied it.

“Serenity,” she said, and I knew that the word was right. Serenity exactly expressed what was written in Bernard Drake’s quiet eyes, and quiet manner, and strangely beautiful smile.

“I don’t fancy there can be any doubt that your Dr. Drake and mine are the same,” I said. “Has he a practice in Australia?”

“He was working in Queensland, in a very out-of-the-way desolate place, where he had to ride miles to see his cases, and his life was a very lonely one, terribly lonely. We always wondered why he didn’t marry. The lonesomeness must have been dreadful.”

“I wonder why,” I echoed. This time Elizabeth’s face came into the line of my mental vision, Elizabeth’s striking face and eager alive personality, a personality that might surely have made all the difference to a lonely man in the wilderness! For a moment my thoughts wandered from what my hostess was saying, and her next words of which I was conscious were:

“. . . and as far as I know he is in Malay now; and the life there must be just as lonely as in Queensland, perhaps even worse.”

“How strange!” I exclaimed. “What took him there?”

"I believe he had a brother settled in Malay somewhere, but they were not living together. Dr. Drake took up a coffee plantation, and is running that, and doing medical work too. But it must be frightfully lonely. I saw a letter of his written to an Australian friend, and he says he sits outside his bungalow in the evening, watching the river with its sampans, and crocodiles, and birds! And he speaks again of the quietness. Why doesn't he marry?"

"Perhaps a woman wouldn't care for such a quiet existence," I answered, but I remembered the pain in Elizabeth's eyes, and I knew that one woman at least would have followed Bernard Drake to the back of beyond, no matter how desolate and lonely it might be, glad to go into the most remote corner of the earth, so long as she were by his side!

The pity of it! Oh! the pity of it, my heart cried out; whilst I listened to Mrs. Denton's words of warm admiration for the man who had so unwittingly hurt my dear Elizabeth.

"Dr. Drake and Val got on splendidly," Mrs. Denton was saying. "He came to our wedding, and brought me a horseshoe brooch for luck. I wish he would come to England. Val and I would so love to show him our home."

"It seems such a waste," I exclaimed vehemently, "such a waste that a man like that should be buried in the backwoods all alone."

She looked at me silently for a moment, an odd expression in her eyes, an expression I could not interpret.

"Do you feel as if he were swept already into the Eternal Dustbin?" she questioned; and I suppose my look expressed my non-comprehension, for she added quickly: "Val says everything we are and do, goes ultimately into the Eternal Dustbin."

"How depressing!" I responded.

"Oh, no, it isn't," it was her turn to lean forward eagerly, "you see, he means that our hopes and endeavours, our successess, our muddles, our good and our bad, all go into the dustbin; but not to be destroyed. They will be sorted out, and picked over, and sifted; and what is worth saving will go on. Val quotes that wonderful saying:

"'Out of the Old the New. God's Face is towards the future.'"

"The Eternal Dustbin." The words haunted me, as I walked home across the Close where the smooth grass was starred with daisies, and over the high red wall of one of the canons' houses, a pink monthly rose waved its delicate blossoms. "The Eternal Dustbin." All the bits and wisps of our days would be deposited there; all the clutter of our lives swept into it, to be sorted out into newness! The phrase stayed with me.

I liked the thought. I felt I should like to meet

Bishop Valentine Denton ; there must be something fresh and original about his outlook. Perhaps he would be less bishopry than some of his kind whom I had had the honour of meeting ! Perhaps his eyes were not so hedged in by ecclesiastical blinkers, as some eyes unfortunately were. He and his wife promised to be refreshing oases in some of the desert-like stretches of Branchester society, for there were desert spaces there, as well as very pleasant ones.

Then my thoughts drifted away to Elizabeth, sent in that direction by Mrs. Denton's talk of Australia, and of Bernard Drake. Strange what a small world we live in ! Who would have imagined that in this rather remote cathedral town, I should come across somebody who had actually known Bernard Drake in the Antipodes ? Strange how the threads of various people's lives twine and intertwine, in what seems like the confusion your kitten produces in your knitting ; until all the ends are inextricably tangled ; and no way of disentanglement is visible ! Strange, indeed, and inexplicable, my thoughts ran on, as I walked towards our own house, to meet on the threshold one of my most unwelcome *bêtes noires*, Miss Sternaby.

CHAPTER VII

GOSSIP

SHE was even more of a bugbear to Miles than to me, and my usually tolerant and kindly husband fled from her, as if she were the plague ! “ ‘ The poison of asps is under her lips,’ ” he said once, “ and I prefer not to have any of it dropped over me ! ” If he caught sight of the little old maid half a mile along the road, he suddenly remembered an errand of immense importance, which necessitated his turning down a side lane. If he had the most distant inkling that she might come to our house, an imperative engagement took him out, or he was so deeply immersed in work in his own study, that he must on no account be disturbed !

Miss Sternaby was short, with a tendency to middle-aged spread. Her eyes were dark and rather beady ; she had a way of moving her head like some inquisitive bird ; and she gesticulated a good deal with her hands. She affected a girlish manner, which sat rather forlornly upon her middle-aged shoulders ; and she was just a trifle waggish,

not to say coquettish, which was another count against her in Miles' eyes.

Upon that June afternoon she was absolutely waiting for me on my doorstep; and there was no possibility of evading her. I only hoped devoutly that my poor Miles was not comfortably ensconced in the drawing-room, with no means of escape!

Miss Sternaby greeted me with her head a little on one side, and a rather toothy smile.

"I saw you coming across the Close," she said, "so I knew I should really catch you this time. I have been so unlucky in missing you more than once; and there are ever so many things I want to discuss with you."

Translated into the truth, this meant, "There are so many *people* I want to discuss with you!" and my heart sank to the very bottom of my shoes. But what could a civilised being do, excepting what I did—namely, insert my latchkey in the door, invite Miss Sternaby to come in, and ring the drawing-room bell for tea.

The mellow sunlight lay over the garden, and the grey mass of the Cathedral was outlined against a sky which Rome might have envied! There were white pinks flowering in our beds, as in the Dentons' garden; and a bush of Scotch roses under the drawing-room window sent in puffs of sweetness, which gave one an intoxicating reminder that this was June.

To my relief the drawing-room was empty, and I hoped that when Miles came home, he would make inquiries of Deborah, and not burst in suddenly upon his pet aversion. That lady was already by the window, uttering staccato exclamations of delight.

"I *love* your garden," she said; "you *are* so lucky to have a piece of water in it. Some day I shall beg you to let me do a sketch from the path by the water. I have always *longed* to do it, but Canon Williams, who used to live here, was very unapproachable."

Canon Williams had long since departed to another world; and his successor had been ordered abroad for some months, hence our good fortune in getting this delightful house; but I felt a sudden sympathy with the departed Canon who had been unapproachable! For one wild moment I even wished that I too were more unapproachable; whilst Miss Sternaby babbled on, apparently quite indifferent as to whether I answered her or not.

"Sketching is a passion with me," she was saying, "absolutely a *passion*. I never know which of my poor little talents gives me most pleasure, my small attempts at painting, or my tiny little attempts at writing."

At this point she giggled—I can describe the sound she emitted by no other name! She giggled and glanced at me archly, with an evident wish

to be questioned about her "poor little talents." I was quite glad to fall in with her wishes. I was glad to do anything which would fend her off from gossip, and I said quite eagerly:

"You write as well as paint? Of course, I knew you painted." As a matter of fact I could not help knowing this. Nobody who was acquainted with her could possibly help knowing it, because she introduced the subject on any and every occasion; but that she wrote as well was news to me.

Again she giggled, and also wriggled in a fashion peculiarly her own, and most exasperating.

"I oughtn't to call it *writing*," she said coyly, "my efforts are so slight, so amateurish. I have never really learnt to use my pen; but sometimes I try and put down little thoughts and impressions, and they have got into print."

"How very nice," was my polite response.

"Yes, the local paper has taken some of my trifles, and the Parish Magazine, too. I may whisper to you, quite between ourselves, that I have great hopes of doing better some day, of appearing in a really good magazine."

"I hope you will," I said heartily, thankful to remain on this safe ground. "You haven't ventured on a novel yet?"

She wagged her head at me, until the rose which stood erect in her hat shook and shivered, and her expression of archness deepened.

"Now how *did* you guess, Mrs. Hanley?" she exclaimed. "You must be a witch, or you have second sight."

"Then you really are writing, or have written a novel?" I pursued the subject almost feverishly, hoping that we might really avoid altogether the shortcomings of our neighbours.

"You must promise not to tell," she murmured. "It is a very precious secret, but quite in confidence, I *am* trying to write a novel. Of course I am only just *beginning* it, planning it out, and so on. It will have a great deal of local colour."

My heart sank to the depths again. Local colour? Did she propose to make Branchester the setting of her novel, and the unfortunate inhabitants of that town, her characters? Poor victims! How I pitied them! I reminded myself that Miles and I might quite well be numbered amongst them. Well, thank goodness, was my consoling reflection, Miles and I, as a perfectly happy, perfectly humdrum couple, represent that fortunate nation which has no history! We had no thrilling points for the novelist.

"And that reminds me," my visitor's voice went on, after Deborah had brought in the tea, and set it close to the window, where the scent of the roses comforted me. "That reminds me, I very particularly want to consult you about something."

"To consult me?" The teapot nearly dropped

from my hand, and I suppose I looked the astonishment I felt, for she sniggered faintly.

"Dear Mrs. Hanley, I am sure lots and lots of people must come to ask your advice," she said, in a sort of fawning tone which nauseated me, "it is always such a help to come for advice to someone who has lived in a bigger circle than our small Branchester one."

"I am afraid I can't pretend to be a good counsellor," I interposed hurriedly. "I am sure there are a great many people here, who would give much wiser advice than I could."

She wagged her head roguishly.

"Oh no, no, I don't in the *least* agree with you. Ever since I first met you I have felt you would be so *wise*."

If there is one thing I detest more than another, it is fulsome flattery of this description; and I am sure my manner must have shown outward traces of inward frigidity!

"I do not think you would find me in the least wise," I said coldly; but you might quite as well try to repel the unwelcome advances of a diplo-doccus, as snub Miss Sternaby.

She went on as if I had responded most amicably.

"Ah, but I know better," she said with that toothy smile which was so repellent. "I do really and *seriously* want to consult you about Mrs. Groveland."

"Mrs. Groveland?" I questioned vaguely, with

a dim recollection of having heard the name, but quite unable to attach to it any personality.

"You *must* have heard of Mrs. Groveland?" Miss Sternaby exclaimed, with what I can only describe as a sort of hungry eagerness. She reminded me irresistibly of an excited hen, greedily hunting over the farmyard for the choicest titbits of grain; and in her excitement she drew her chair a little nearer to me, and bent forward impetuously. "You *surely* have heard of the lady who lives in the grey house by the gate?"

"That charming-looking little house that stands back in its own garden, near the South gate?" I asked, and she nodded.

"Oh yes, it is a *charming* house, and the pity of it is that somebody like *this*, should have insinuated herself into it."

"But surely Mrs. Groveland is just an ordinary tenant, paying rent in an ordinary way?" I said, whilst from somewhere in the back of my brain, stray fragments of gossip floated up from my inner consciousness; and I recalled that I had here and there heard the lady in question mentioned with bated breath.

"Pay her rent? Oh, I expect she does *that* all right," Miss Sternaby answered. "The house belonged to old Dr. Dawes, and his executors simply disposed of it, as best they could. But

I wasn't thinking about the *rent*, or anything of *that* kind, when I spoke of Mrs. Groveland. It is she *herself* who is troubling me."

"Troubling you?" I looked very blank and innocent, but I knew I was only staving off the evil moment which was upon me.

"I look upon you as such good counsel," Miss Sternaby continued, "and as I said just now, coming from London, you take a different view of things from the view we take here, and so I thought I would ask your advice."

"My advice?" Repeating her remarks seemed a safe method of conversation, but my tormentor intended to pin me down like the veriest butterfly, and I was not to be allowed to escape.

"I feel that, a spinster, living alone, must be just a *little* careful," she continued, and I heroically suppressed an overwhelming desire to laugh. "A good many strange things are being said about Mrs. Groveland."

"Probably all the strange things are untrue," was my dry response, at which her insufferable giggle burst forth once more.

"You put things so quaintly," she chuckled, "and you may be right too. Perhaps *some* of the rumours about Mrs. Groveland may not be true, but on the other hand, there is *not* often smoke without fire."

"Consider what a lot of smoke a very infinitesimal fire can cause," I returned. "Personally, I never

believe stories about people, when the stories are obviously mere gossip."

"But how can one *tell* whether they are gossip or not? And oughtn't one to be, well, to be just a *little* careful?"

I looked at her lined, rather pinched face; her grey hair; the eyes about which so many crows' feet were drawn; and again I badly wanted to laugh. Why should this middle-aged, plain, and wholly unprepossessing maiden lady, consider it necessary to be careful? Careful in what way? Careful of whom?

She herself partially answered my questions.

"You see one cannot touch pitch without getting defiled," she said slowly, "and besides that, one does not want to mix with doubtful people, or have one's name associated with them, and Mrs. Groveland——"

Her pause exasperated me. I am afraid my exasperation showed in my voice.

"Just what is it you are insinuating about Mrs. Groveland? Why should she be shunned?"

A little colour came into Miss Sternaby's sallow cheeks; she drew herself up with a funny assumption of dignity.

"I am *insinuating* nothing," she said, more stiffly than she had yet spoken. "The reports about Mrs. Groveland were not invented by *me*. I hear what I hear, and I have no reason to doubt it. But I came to *you*, hoping you would give me

really sound advice. I did not come to be told I was *insinuating* anything against anybody. I have not *made up* any stories."

She looked so offended that I felt it was my bounden duty to propitiate her; and as her hostess, I could not let her think I intended to insult her.

"I did not mean that you were making up stories," I said gently. "I only meant, that, instead of inferences, I would rather hear the plain facts about Mrs. Groveland. I know nothing about her at all, excepting her name, and where she lives."

"Well, she is a youngish woman," Miss Sternaby's ruffled tones softened, "and nobody knows who or what she is; whether she is a widow, or living apart from her husband, or whether," here Miss Sternaby dropped her voice, "whether she is married at all."

I wanted to say "But do Mrs. Groveland's private affairs matter to anybody but herself?" when I remembered that in a place like Branchester, a woman alone could not live her own life, without comment and speculation from the neighbours. She was always, more or less, under a microscope, and liable to dissection! I therefore answered, as calmly as I could:

"It seems to me that if this lady is living a quiet, inoffensive life, her antecedents are no affair of ours."

"Don't you think one *ought*, I mean don't you think we have a—a sort of *duty* to ourselves and to society, that should make us keep away from what may be *evil*?" Miss Sternaby ventured, but she spoke with much less assurance than before, and I was confident that my reception of her remarks had considerably damped her. I was glad.

"I don't think it is my business to pry into Mrs. Groveland's past life, or to worry about it," I said. "I have not called on her yet, but I shall certainly call to-morrow. Mrs. Groveland's present life is really all that concerns me, or anybody else, as far as I can see."

"But—*dear* Mrs. Hanley"—how I did dislike being called "*dear* Mrs. Hanley"—"you can't really approve of young girls mixing *indiscriminately* with a woman whose past may hold, well we don't know what it may hold," she ended desperately.

"That is just the point. We do *not* know what her past may hold, or whether it holds anything of which either she or we need be ashamed. I have a rooted repugnance to being influenced by rumours and gossip."

"But they say——" the little lady began eagerly.

"They say. What say they? Let them say," I interrupted. "Please forgive me if I seem brusque or disagreeable, but really I do so dislike listening

to what people say about this person or that. Why can't we let the unfortunate person's own actions speak for themselves? "

" I am *sure* you are right," my visitor exclaimed, with an enthusiasm which I was equally sure she did not feel. " You have such *beautiful* Christian charity. I *wish* I could be as charitable as you are."

" Well, so you can," I replied with a brusqueness of which I was ashamed, but the creature nauseated me. " We can all refrain from evil speaking, lying, and slandering."

" But I don't think, I didn't mean——" Miss Sternaby stammered, the colour mounting to her cheeks.

" Oh, do forgive me," I said with compunction. " I am afraid I spoke very hastily and very rudely, but I have such a horror of gossip."

" Oh, yes, indeed so have I," my visitor had the effrontery to assure me, " and I should not have *mentioned* to you all that is being said about Mrs. Groveland, but that I *really* did want your advice."

" Do you know, Miss Sternaby, I honestly do not feel capable of giving anybody else advice about such a thing as this," I said. " I think each person can only act as he or she feels is most right. To send a fellow creature to coventry because of some chance and possibly untrue gossip, has always seemed to me quite a wrong procedure ; but I don't

feel capable of judging for anybody but myself in such a delicate matter."

"Will you really call on her yourself?" Miss Sternaby ventured to ask, quite timidly for her.

"Yes, I shall call," was my firm and rather brusque reply, "I shall certainly call."

"Then—then Dr. Hanley will not object to your knowing Mrs. Groveland?" was my visitor's next amazing remark.

"Dr. Hanley? My husband?" I looked at her blankly, for the moment really not understanding the drift of her remark. Then I grasped it, and laughed. The very idea that Miles might ever interfere with any of my social doings, was ludicrous. "My husband and I see eye to eye about most things," I said cheerfully, "and if we don't see eye to eye, we agree to differ."

"Oh! how modern!" she giggled. "You are not at all an Early Victorian wife, Mrs. Hanley, meekly obeying your husband in everything."

"Heaven forbid!" was my pious ejaculation. "If I did, it would be exceedingly bad for him, and equally bad for me."

"How true! How advanced!" she giggled again. "I do think it is delightful when wives are not just meek Griseldas."

"Oh! I am afraid there is not a trace of the Griselda about me," I answered. "My husband and I would both strongly disapprove of Griseldaishness."

She cackled once more ; murmured again that I was very advanced ; and then, to my unspeakable relief took her leave, before I had been actively rude to her. I am not sure that my manners would have held out very much longer ! They were already wearing very thin ; and when she had gone I drew a long breath, and went into the garden, to shake off her aura, as I put it to myself.

The garden ought to have shaken off unpleasantness of every description ; and it quickly had a soothing effect upon me. It wore such an air of brooding peace ; and the massive wonder of the cathedral rearing itself straight up from our own smooth lawn gave me, as it never failed to do, a sense of restfulness and strength. The bees were busy amongst our white pinks, and their drowsy humming was deliciously soothing. A chaffinch sat and watched me from the boughs of a hawthorn tree, twittering his little flustered song, and flicking his brown wings, as if he were very gay and full of life ; and down by the water's edge the swallows were skimming, and I saw forget-me-nots lifting their heavenly blue faces, to a sky scarcely less blue than they.

I sat down beside the water and let myself relax and dream for a few minutes. There were many things I ought to have been doing ; notes to write ; a committee to arrange ; my speech to think over for the Debating Society I had been persuaded to join. But Miss Sternaby had left me feeling

mentally breathless and rather tired ; and I wanted to let my mind go limp for a few minutes, and my thoughts rove at will.

They resolutely roved away from my late visitor and her tiresome gossip, and went back to the bishop's wife, curled up on the window seat. What a lovable soul she was ! I recalled her frank eyes, her charm of manner, her simplicity of outlook ; and then I compared her in my thoughts, with the sort of bishop's wife I had imagined she would be—portly, middle-aged, and impressive.

“ But I like the reality best,” I reflected, as I idly watched a water wagtail strut along the path with a flick of his tail, “ she is so unusual. I wonder what Miss Sternaby thinks of her ! ” From Miss Sternaby and Mrs. Denton, my thoughts wandered, as they often did, to my dear Elizabeth in her far-away East ; and I wondered whether I would write and tell her all that Mrs. Denton had told me about Bernard Drake, and his life in far away lands. “ Yes, I think I will,” I concluded, “ it will give her joy to hear about him, even if it hurts her. She must ache for news of him.”

Miles' voice roused me from my reverie. Whenever he came into the house the first thing he did was to look for me, and to call my name.

“ I guessed I should find you here,” he said, as he came to me across the lawn, “ this is just the place to suit you, on such an evening.”

“ My dear, I have been trying to eliminate Miss

Sternaby," I said, "she left me about half an hour ago."

"Thank heaven I did not meet her on the doorstep! That woman exudes pure poison."

"She does, and she poured it over me until I was nearly rude; and when she went away I had to come out here to simmer down. One quite definite upshot of her visit," this I said with great firmness, "is that I am going to-morrow to call on Mrs. Groveland."

CHAPTER VIII

MRS. GROVELAND

THE grey house by the gate was one of the very old houses in a town of old houses, and unlike many of its neighbours, it was built, not of red brick, but of grey stone. Ever since I had first caught a glimpse of it, during our early days in Branchester, I had liked the look of that house close to the South gate. I liked the austerity of its grey stone ; I liked the combined air of aloofness and homeyness, which it had somehow managed to achieve.

The inside of the house pleased me as much as the outside. The front door opened straight into a hall furnished as a sitting-room, a fashion not so prevalent then as now ; and it gave me a pleasant sense of being welcomed, when I saw book-strewn tables ; cosy armchairs ; bookcases ; and vases filled with flowers.

The room was empty, but an open book lying beside some needlework on a small table, seemed to show that the occupant had only lately left it ; and as I stood beside the big open fireplace, I

caught a glimpse of her through a window which opened into the garden. Her back was turned to me; she was reaching up to pick a rose from the wall, when the parlourmaid crossed the lawn and spoke to her, and I saw her turn and come quickly towards the house.

Before I had time to note any details about her, she was in the room beside me, holding out a hand in greeting.

"How good of you to come!" she said, and I fancied there was wistfulness in her voice; there was certainly wistfulness in her eyes, green-grey eyes, shadowed by dark lashes.

Either the June air, or the surprise of my visit, had brought a soft colour into her face; and I thought then, as I think still, that her face was one of the loveliest I have ever seen. How I had failed to notice her in Branchester streets, I cannot imagine, for I generally take note of every pretty face I come across. But assuredly I never had seen Bridget Groveland before. Nobody who had once seen her, could ever have forgotten her. It is difficult to describe her; difficult indeed to say exactly wherein her loveliness lay. There were no faultless outlines in her face; no "beauty of the gods . . . most divinely fair"; no particular regularity of feature, yet the whole woman was lovely: there was an indefinable charm about her, which is indescribable. Her smile caught at my heart at once, and the wistfulness in her eyes made

me feel very choky ; whilst her voice, which had a curiously vibrant quality, pleased my very fastidious taste in voices.

"I am not at all sure that I am right in calling upon you," I answered gaily, realising instinctively that for some reason she was at rather high tension, "or whether I ought in strict etiquette to have waited until you called upon me."

"*Until I called upon you!*" she exclaimed. "Why—I——"

"I mean I am not sure which of us is the oldest inhabitant," I broke in. "My husband and I are comparatively newcomers ; and in any case, more or less birds of passage. We may not be here more than a year or two."

"Oh!" She drew a long breath. "I don't think it matters which of us came here first. It is heavenly kind of you to have called on me at all!"

She had pushed a chair forward for me, and seated herself upon a low couch near the window ; the roses she had just gathered, glowing crimson against the pale grey of her gown.

"Before I came here, I had an idea that people living in a cathedral town would be very kind and charitable, ready—ready to make allowances!" She laughed a funny little shaky laugh, that pulled at my heartstrings ; and what Miles calls my "mother side" went out to the poor lovely thing with her wistful eyes.

"My dear," I said, "people in cathedral towns are much like people all the world over."

"Oh! no, they are not," a sudden vehemence came into her voice, "they are worse, they are much worse. They profess so much, and do so little. I ask you, what is the good of going to services every day in that cathedral, which seems to shout to you that God is Love, when they only come out to gossip, and to show malice and cruelty to their fellow creatures?"

"Don't you think you are perhaps imagining the malice and cruelty?" I questioned, though that horrible Miss Sternaby's face and voice jumped into my mind, to give the lie to my words.

"No, I am not imagining." Her lips set in a straight line which made her look hard, and years older. "They are supposed to be followers of the Man who said 'Go and sin no more,' but they do not come within a million miles of understanding what He was talking about."

Until five minutes ago, Mrs. Groveland and I had been complete strangers, not even knowing one another by sight. Now all at once I seemed to have plunged into the deep waters which lay about her; and I realised that to talk trivialities and mere drawing-room inanities, was impossible.

"Sometimes people misjudge, because they don't know the truth," I ventured. "They jump to wrong conclusions."

"They have not jumped to wrong conclusions about me," she said bitterly, "their conclusions are probably right enough; but why do they so completely forget that only the ones without sin have any business to throw stones. They don't attempt to *live* their Christianity!"

"None of us find it easy to live our Christianity," I said gently, with a very real longing to help this woman who gave me the feeling that she was facing the world with her back against the wall. "Do you think perhaps it has been a question rather of misunderstanding, than of intentional unkindness?"

"I don't suppose they misunderstood! What they heard about me is quite true. I ought to tell you that straight away, then you need not stay with me a moment longer, to be contaminated."

I could not bear the bitterness in her voice, the misery in her eyes. I put out my hand and touched hers, that lay upon the crimson roses.

"My dear," I said, "I am not the least afraid of being contaminated. If you would let me, I should like to be your friend."

"If I would *let* you! When Saunders, my parlourmaid, came to tell me there was a visitor in the lounge, I felt like shouting aloud for joy. Nobody has been to see me for weeks. Directly they got an inkling of the truth about me they

fought shy of me. And it is the truth, you know," she added, looking at me, with something of defiance in her eyes.

"I don't know what the truth may be," was my firm reply, "whatever it is, makes not the slightest difference to my wish to be your friend."

"Not the slightest dif——" She seemed incapable of even finishing the word, and it ended in a tiny sob, which again nearly choked me.

"Not the slightest difference," I repeated with increased firmness. "I came to call on you to-day, with the express purpose of making friends."

"But you have heard something about me? You are not under the delusion that I am just an ordinary 'nice' woman?" She said the words almost fiercely. "You ought to draw away your skirts from me, lest you should be defiled!"

"I am not going to beat about the bush with you," I answered. "I have heard very little; but I *have* heard a little, and the fact that rumours about you reached my ears, made me settle to call on you at once."

"Then the city holds one righteous person!" she exclaimed, with a touch of flippancy. "Not enough to save it if fire and brimstone came down upon it from Heaven, but still—one righteous person!"

"Don't jump to conclusions." I tried to speak

lightly. "We cannot in the least say how many righteous people Branchester holds; nor does it especially concern us. All that matters at the moment, is that I should convince you of my friendliness."

"I shall not be hard to convince." Her smile was pathetic. "I have no friends here, none at all. However," she all at once shrugged her shoulders, and sat very upright, "I am quite capable of getting along without people, if people prefer to give me the cold shoulder, which, as a matter of fact, I deserve. I am quite a black sheep, you know, really a *black* sheep, not merely a *grey* one."

"I have rather a weakness for black sheep," was my rejoinder, "so shall we take the minutes as read, so to speak, and pass on to the friendly attitude?"

"Do you mean to say you would take me for granted, and not inquire into my antecedents, or behaviour?" She gave a little gasp.

"I have every intention of taking you for granted; and your antecedents are your own, and no concern of mine. Can't we let the dead past bury its dead?"

"No, we can't," she cried vehemently, "do you think I would allow you to be so good to me, in the dark, without knowing how black I am painted, and quite rightly painted too?" she added, with again that touch of defiance. "I don't know what

exactly you have heard about me? Probably a doubt as to whether I am married or not. Well, I am not." She looked at me as though she expected some expression of dismay or surprise, but I said nothing. "No, I am not married," she repeated, after a few minutes, "and I am not a widow. My, the man with whom I lived"—her eyes looked straight into mine—"has a wife. He and I could not marry. She, his wife made his life, hell." Here for an instant her voice broke, but she recovered herself, and went on. "He and I were happy. Perhaps it was wicked, but we were. Then his wife became ill. He went back to her. He thought it was right, and so did I." She spoke in short choppy sentences, which, I thought, covered very deep emotion. "I ought to have buried myself in town."

"No one can find a word to say against the life you are living now?"

"Oh! I am running straight now. I have not seen—him—for two years. I am never likely to see him again. I—do not mean to see him again. I have cut adrift from my past."

"Then no one has any business to throw stones at you," I exclaimed.

"They are not exactly throwing stones. They are ignoring me. They just draw aside their skirts, and pass by on the other side. And you see, in a way they are justified! I am not married, and I suppose everybody knows or guesses I was living

with Dermot Marston. They are more than justified in treating me as unclean. My maiden name was Groveland. I call myself Mrs. Groveland, instead of Miss. That is all."

"Because you have made one false step, it is not to be assumed that you cannot retrieve it," I said. "If you will let me talk all this over with my husband, I believe we shall both be able to help you. He is a very understanding person."

"If you and he are at all alike, I am sure he is," she said, "and I don't a bit mind your talking to him about my wretched affairs. When you came to-day, I was feeling almost at the end of my tether. I did not think I *could* go on. Now—there seems to be a glimmer of light at the end of a long dark passage."

"Of course there is," I rejoined briskly, "there is plenty of light. Take heart. You are not going to find it easy to climb out of your ditch, but you will climb out of it; and we will give you a hand in the climbing. Do you know the bishop's wife?" I added suddenly, the words coming almost without my own volition.

"The bishop's wife? Why, no! She wouldn't have anything to say to me! I am not the sort of person bishops' wives care to know."

"This is a very uncommon bishop's wife," was my smiling answer. "I never met anybody at all like her; and I cannot imagine that in the whole

universe there can be a second bishop, who has a wife of the same sort."

"I don't even know her by sight, but then I have avoided the cathedral lately. I haven't felt inclined to mix very much with so-called Christians."

Again I touched her hand. "My dear, I understand why you feel bitter, but try, I beseech you try, not to let bitterness into your heart."

"It is there already," she said, "'the iron has entered into my soul.'"

CHAPTER IX

BITS OF THINGS

THAT was the beginning of my friendship with Bridget. I believe that our friendship caused a certain small sensation in that city of small sensations; but nobody dared to question my right to call upon any person I chose, or to make what friends I pleased. Miles' position set us a little above outspoken criticism, though I am sure there was plenty of secret talking over, and chattering and wagging of heads, about "that Mrs. Hanley's extraordinary ways." Miss Sternaby more than hinted once or twice that I was looked upon as a little peculiar, by the dear people of Branchester; but that my peculiarities were condoned—more or less, because I was a Londoner, and not quite versed in the correct procedure of a country town!

The criticism, whether open or covert, troubled me very little; and when I found that Rosemary Denton was likewise a target for those sharply tipped arrows of critical overhauling, I accepted them with even greater equanimity! That Mrs. Denton should follow my ill-judged action, and

call upon Mrs. Groveland too, was regarded as far from befitting the wife of a bishop, even though he was only a colonial bishop, in an archdeacon's skin!

Miss Sternaby voiced the feelings of the community, when, on a certain August afternoon she, as she expressed it, "just dropped in to see how you are." In my spirit I groaned. She did not in the least wish to see how I was, I knew that perfectly well. She merely wished either to impart to me some morsel of gossip, or to extract some information from me. When Miss Sternaby was announced, one never knew which of these two reasons was the true one for her coming. It was bound to be one or the other.

She caught me that afternoon in a positive trap. I was lazing in the garden, rejoicing in the heat that made the shade of the cathedral very grateful, as a contrast to the blaze of sunshine in which the rest of the garden lay. The water was very still, and the reflections of the great building in its blue depths, was photographic in its every detail. Scarcely a leaf stirred; and the only sounds were the murmuring of bees in the flower beds, the occasional splash of a fish in the still water, and the regular chiming of the cathedral clock, as it struck the quarters.

I had a book in my hand, but I am afraid I must have been dozing over it, for all the sentences had run together into a confused mixture, and I was conscious of a funny little dream, when a resonant

voice saying: "Miss Sternaby, madam," roused me into full wakefulness. Deborah looked at me with a twinkle in her usually well-controlled eyes, and she was kind enough to stand between me and the advancing visitor, for the fraction of a second, until I had become really wide awake.

"Dear Mrs. Hanley, I felt I must just drop in to see how this heat is suiting you," she said. "But oh! how *heavenly* it is here," she added ecstatically, "such *peace*, such *restfulness*!"

I dislike being called "Dear Mrs. Hanley"; that to start with rubbed me up; and to go on with, I cannot bear ecstasies with any real tolerance. I believe my tone was frigid as I answered her, but frigidity has as much effect upon Miss Sternaby, as water upon the back of the duck.

"The heat suits me admirably," I said. "I always tell my husband the conventional Hell will be far too pleasant a place for me. I shall enjoy the warmth! Dante's ice-cold Hell would be a suitable place of punishment for a person of my constitution."

"Ah! you are always so humorous," my visitor cackled. "Now this heat takes it out of me. I feel as limp as a rag, and I do envy you your garden going down to the water. The very sight of that water has a cooling effect. You are luckier than Bishop Denton in your garden."

"But on the other hand the bishop gets that delicious view of the downs."

"Yes, yes, of course he does." For a moment Miss Sternaby's eyes grew dreamy, as though they were visualising the downs (which I am sure they were not doing, they were merely visualising methods of creeping round to the piece of gossip she wished to exude next).

"In cutting down some trees, the bishop has made extra peeps at the downs," she said.

"Wise man," I said succinctly.

"Wise, perhaps," Miss Sternaby's head poised itself a little on one side, "but I *do* feel it is dreadful to see beautiful trees cut down. It makes one's heart *bleed*."

"Oh no, it doesn't make mine do anything of the sort," I answered briskly. "I cannot bear to see a garden choked up with trees and shrubs. If this was my own garden I should do a great deal of thinning out!"

"Oh! Mrs. Hanley, not *really*?" She gave an effective little squeak. "Then I am afraid you and that naughty bishop would agree; he is a *terrible* tree cutter! I wonder whether his wife feels as he does about trees? She comes from backwoods, or bush, or something."

"Mrs. Denton is an Australian." My tone was very stiff. "She probably knows quite a good deal about trees."

"She is *very* unlike other people, isn't she?" Miss Sternaby next remarked in her most ingratiating

accents. "Really *quite* unlike what one imagines a bishop's wife would be."

My bristles began to rise. I knew in my bones that this little worm of a woman was going to criticise that precious girl whom Bishop Denton was lucky enough to call his wife.

"Bishops' wives are not run off in moulds," was my rather flippant response. "They are not all exactly alike." I don't know whether my voice had in it an unusually irritable note, but those bristles of mine having risen, my voice caught some inflection from them.

Miss Sternaby looked quite startled.

"Oh! dear Mrs. Hanley, I *hope* I haven't said anything I ought not to have said," she exclaimed. "I am *sure* Mrs. Denton is charming, and—and everything; and of course bishops' wives *would* not be all exactly alike. I don't mean that—but Mrs. Denton is really rather *extra* unusual; and in Branchester perhaps we are very conservative, only—it *does* seem odd to find a bishop's wife curled up on a window seat! And she says quite curious things too."

The words poured from her in a positive torrent. I felt powerless to check it. I could only sit and look at her, and allow her to run down, which she eventually did.

"I cannot quite see why Mrs. Denton should not sit curled up on the window seat if she happens to like it," I commented drily, "and

I have never heard her say anything very extraordinary."

"Well, to my thinking she talks *very* strangely about her husband," Miss Sternaby said, pursing up her lips and half closing her eyes. "*I* am old fashioned enough to look upon a husband as the *head* of the wife, to be looked up to and respected; but really Mrs. Denton does not seem to look *up* to her husband at all, even though he is a bishop."

"I don't see that the bishop part of it has anything to do with the case! A bishop is a mere man after all, and as his wife presumably knows him better than anybody else does, she realises his little human failings, underneath his episcopal virtues."

My visitor looked shocked. I believe she felt I had almost given utterance to something blasphemous.

"I expect I *am* old fashioned, and perhaps Early Victorian," she said with a little simper, "but to me the idea of a wife feeling that *her* king can do no wrong, is *so* beautiful."

I laughed. I am sorry, but I really could not help it. I laughed, and laughed; and then I gasped out:

"Do forgive me, but the feeling would be so contrary to facts! Our kings do wrong quite often, and we know it. Why should we pretend? Hadn't we better try to help them to do right, instead of deluding ourselves with the fancy that

they never do wrong? Mrs. Denton is far too sane and clear-headed to indulge in such foolish imaginings. Men are not kings a bit. They are much more like little boys."

"Oh well," Miss Sternaby wriggled and bridled, "Mrs. Denton is peculiar in *many* ways. She has *no* idea of keeping people in their places. She mixes everything up so, and *everybody* too."

"Keeping what people in their places?" I questioned, really feeling rather mystified.

"She has no *class-sense*," was the next surprising remark. "She asks all *kinds* of people to tea. Why the other day the Dalbys were there. You know Dalby, the draper in High Street? Quite a worthy, *respectable* man, and his wife quite worthy too, but *not* the sort one asks to tea."

"Why in the world not?" I said, and I am afraid I said it in a spirit of pure perversity, because I knew perfectly well that Branchester arranged its social strata with the exactitude of a geologist, and one stratum never mingled with another. But Miss Sternaby's unctuous assumption that a draper's wife might by no means partake of tea with the wife of a bishop aroused all my worst feelings; and as Miles truthfully told me later, I was extremely naughty. I meant to be. I was.

It is sometimes a very real pleasure to be consciously and deliberately naughty. I experienced that pleasure on that hot afternoon, when Miss Sternaby sat opposite me in the garden, her eyes

and mouth both rather widely open, her face one complete expression of disapproval.

"Oh! Mrs. Hanley," she exclaimed at last, "you *surely* cannot think it is wise to invite people to tea, when they are not of our own social standing? It leads to a *thousand* little awkwardnesses! Now it is quite different when the dean invites practically *everybody*, everybody excepting the working classes of course I mean, to his annual garden party. That seems to me quite right and fitting, very *suitable*, and nobody expects things to go any further. I mean to say if I meet Mrs. Dalby *there*, or any other tradesman's wife, we exchange a few remarks, but that is all. They don't expect to be treated afterwards on a social *equality*. It is all as it should be."

"I wonder," I ejaculated, sitting a little forward in my chair, and watching the swallows skim across the grass, "I do wonder whether we shall find it awkward in the next life. *We* may be the under-dogs then, only invited to annual garden parties, in a hotch potch; and never asked to tea with bishops or deans."

My visitor looked shocked.

"I—oh, Mrs. Hanley, do you *really* think it is quite nice to talk about the *next* life lightly, as if it was something rather like this life, instead of——"

"Singing hymns and playing harps?" I could not help interrupting her. "Miss Sternaby, the next life, as I visualise it, will be a continuation of

our present life, not a complete snapping off ; and beginning again. Only, we may find our positions there oddly reversed, who knows? "

" I never like talking in a *light* way about the after life." Miss Sternaby's tones were didactic.

" A light way, certainly not," I agreed, " but you surely cannot suppose that we shall be drapers' wives, or bishops' wives, or whatever it may be, for all Eternity? We shall be simply human beings, on our own merits, all the silly trappings of this world gone for ever, and as for spending our time in singing hymns—I hope to goodness we shall do no such thing. It would bore me to tears! "

" I can see that you and Mrs. Denton have the same *curious* ideas," was the rather stiff rejoinder. " Here, in Branchester, we like the old ways best : we are not *easily* persuaded to like new manners and customs."

" And you don't think that the old is ever to turn into the new? " I questioned, recognising full well that my question was quite futile.

" Oh, no," was the answer, the one I had fully expected, " we *shrink* from new ideas and ways. We feel the old ways are *better*. Why should we set ourselves up to be wiser than our fathers? "

" Because we ought to be better and wiser than our fathers! Every generation ought to shoot well ahead of the generations that went before, otherwise what becomes of progress? We might

just as well have remained cave-dwellers, if we are never going to progress at all."

"Oh, Mrs. Hanley,"—how I wished she would not begin every phrase in this way!—"surely progress is not everything?"

"It is a good deal," my tones were very dry, "if by progress we mean, as I do, betterment in every direction, then progress is fairly vital. But it is too hot to argue," I broke off with a laugh, realising that I was wasting breath and eloquence, "let me pick you a bunch of flowers, and you must forgive a thoroughly unorthodox, unconventional person, for her unconventionality and unorthodoxy."

I metaphorically dragged her out of her chair, and made her go round the garden with me, whilst I cut her a really lovely bouquet of flowers, and prattled gaily the while upon a host of topics wholly unconnected with Branchester, and its population. Finally, I managed to lead her along the path by the water; and as this ended in a gate opening into the lane nearest to her own quarter of the town; she had perforce to say good-bye and go.

Miles found me afterwards, lying back in my chair, in a state of complete exhaustion of mind and body!

"She makes me feel physically tired, as well as mentally," I said, as my husband sat down and stretched out his legs with a sigh of content. "She wrings me out as if I were a rag!"

"She is rather a worm," was Miles' comforting

comment, "but I am inclined to think she has a very stunted, circumscribed existence," my tolerant husband proceeded, "no outlet excepting gossip about the neighbours: nobody much upon whom to expend her love."

"And not much love to expend," I said, with a spitefulness of which I was at once ashamed. "Miles," I exclaimed contritely, "I am a cat of the cattiest kind; of course you are right. That poor little worm has a very stunted life, shut up tight in her own tight little personality, and never able to see far over the edge of her own limited ideas. Perhaps she has often been hungry for more love and—and all the things she has missed."

"Probably she has." Miles by now was smoking his pipe, looking supremely peaceful and happy, just in the mood to be expansive.

"She says Rosemary Denton is not an ideal wife, not Victorian enough. She thinks wives should look upon their husbands as blameless kings!"

"Indeed? Does she? She must find you hugely disappointing." Miles' blue eyes held a twinkle. "I have found no trace of the Griselda in you, and I am convinced you do not regard me as a blameless monarch."

"Your conviction is quite correct," I tossed back. "Did you imagine I should be a doormat, or an Early Victorian adoring and submissive wife?"

"I did not. I did not want that type. Marriage

ought to be an equal partnership ; absolutely equal."

"Miss Sternaby thinks us very advanced. She considers that women ought to look up to their husbands."

"Good Lord ! Why ? "

"Just so ! Good Lord, why ? " I echoed mischievously. "Miles, if I had had a daughter I should have impressed upon her, ground it into her, that men are not lords of creation, to be set up on pedestals and worshipped, and their opinions received as oracles from Heaven ! I should have made her see that men are merely human like ourselves, and not in the least wonderful or superior, or in any way exceptional ! "

Miles' eyes twinkled more than ever. He laughed that nice amused laugh of his, which always really expressed laughter, as so many people's laughs do not express it.

"Your dream daughter would have been well equipped to face life, my dear. For myself, I should always let girls and boys know the simple truth about each other, instead of allowing them to imagine any nonsense about heroes or angels. Your sex is no more angelic than ours is heroic ; we both occasionally attain to angelhood or heroism along difficult roads. But I believe," his eyes grew dreamy, "I believe there will come a generation far wiser than all of us who have gone before, a generation of men and women who will see each

other truthfully, without foolish glamour; who will carry out Tennyson's great words:

‘ And so those twain, upon the Skirts of Time,
Sit side by side, full sunn'd in all their power,
Self reverent each, and reverencing each,
Distinct in individualities,
But like each other even as those who love.’ ”

His words were oddly prophetic. Both he and I lived to see the wonderful new generation in which men and women are equal: the generation which is learning to stand hand in hand together, facing life and its problems; no longer veiling knowledge of each other, or placing each other upon pedestals where no mere human can ever remain securely poised, a generation which knows the truth, and is neither ashamed nor afraid.

CHAPTER X

IN FEBRUARY

JAPONICA hung a scarlet curtain against the wall of the house; in a far corner of the garden a tiny daphne bush was visible, covered with soft pink bloom; and the crocuses, globes of purple, and orange, and white, shone in the grass like stars, and made a dainty ribbon edging along the beds. The garden had that indefinable look of spring, which suddenly seems to touch all nature in February. It was visible in the smooth lawn; it almost shouted aloud from the green buds on the lilac bushes; the elms showed a faint, but unmistakeable crimson tint; and there was a "certain liveliness" among the rooks, which hinted at nesting preparations.

"A promise of spring," I said to Miles, when he joined me in the garden after breakfast. "I expect the catkins are beginning to show on the hazels, I want to go up to the downs and look at that hazel copse we found in the autumn."

"Your want shall be satisfied, my dear. I have a bit of work I must finish this morning, but

come out directly after lunch, and we will go to look at your hazel copse."

Miles and I loved our tramps together across the water meadows, or over the downs, and along the lanes where presently we should find primroses starring the banks. We had never left off being interested in each other's society, and we never lacked conversation. I may add that we were not a couple who invariably agreed about every conceivable subject! Far from it. We often differed acutely, and I was still as unlike the Griselda type of wife, as Miles was the Petruchio class of husband.

As I look back across the years I realise that my husband and I were, in many ways, ahead of our times. Our conception of marriage, and of the relations of man and wife, were very much more those of the present day than of our own generation. We were modern to the backbone, both of us; and I use the word modern, to express the twentieth century, and not the nineteenth.

I suppose I remember that particular February day with such clearness, because Elizabeth's letter had reached me by the second post that morning; and the strange coincidence of what she wrote, and the spring day on which I received it, fixed the date in my mind.

Beyond an occasional post card I had heard nothing of her for months, and the fairly bulky letter which reached me now, contained the first detailed news I had had of her since we parted at

Southampton. She had been in very out-of-the-way places, she wrote, so that my letters had taken a long time to reach her, and also she had been too much overwhelmed with work to write; but when she heard that we were actually in Branchester, she felt she must steal some of the time in which she might be sleeping to send me a line.

"It feels so strange to think you are there," so her letter ran. "I stayed in the dear old place more than once with friends who have since moved away; and it was there that Bernard Drake and I saw each other for almost the last time. I wonder whether the hazel copse on the downs is still where it was on that day, or whether it has all been swept away for building. I remember we reached it by walking up a lane, and under a railway arch, and then going along a field path right on to the downs, and the copse was close to the path. The primroses were out, and wood anemones, and dog violets. It was April, the larks sang, and sang. But I associate the downs at Branchester with a February day too, a day when Bernard and I wandered off together over that lovely short grass; and the whole world seemed to sing aloud that spring was just round the next corner. Some day, when I am quite old, and when things have left off hurting, I should like to see that copse on the downs again, but not yet."

The letter went on to tell me she was going into Central Asia with some intrepid missionary ladies;

and she warned me that it might be many a long day before I heard of her again. "I think I can be of use to this particular Mission," she wrote, "and I must work—and work——"

That letter gave me a heartache, and yet it filled me with the warm admiration I never failed to feel for Elizabeth.

"She is such a valiant soul," I said to Miles, as we went that afternoon along the very lane and field of which she had written, to the identical copse which meant so much to her! For the copse I loved and Elizabeth's copse were one and the same. "Such a valiant soul," I repeated. "Miles, it seems an intolerable waste that that man and woman, who were made for each other, should somehow have missed their way! Why did the whole thing go wrong? The pity of it. Why did they miss their way to the happy life they might have had together?"

We were standing at that moment on the very edge of Elizabeth's copse, where catkins hung on the purpling hazels, and amongst the brown leaves of yesteryear I thought I saw the gleam of an early primrose. The dog violets were not yet in bloom, nor the wood anemones. I could imagine how delicious they would be just a few weeks later on, springing up amongst those leaves that made such a carpet of brown for our feet.

The larks were singing, just as Elizabeth had said, singing as only larks upon the downs know

how to sing, tireless triumphant songs, that seem to belong to those great translucent spaces of downland and sky. From where we stood, we could see the graciously austere curves of the downs with a background of faint blue sky, and far below us a silver thread of river meandered across the water meadows.

"Miles, why do things go wrong in such a hopelessly unnecessary way?" I repeated, when he did not at first answer me.

He was still silent for a moment, looking out across the distance, a thoughtful expression on his face, and when he turned to me, he shook his head.

"It is a puzzle beyond my solving," he answered, "excepting that I believe the reason I originally gave you holds good. When Elizabeth and that man Drake first met, she was undeveloped. She had not acquired some quality of womanhood which is needed. The man she cared for, the man who up to a point obviously cared for her, she failed to attract in exactly the right way. I agree with you it was a tragedy."

"I wonder what Bishop Denton would say about Elizabeth and the Eternal Dustbin, if he knew her?"

"The Eternal Dustbin?" Miles stared at me.

"Now, my most oblivious and most dear husband," I said, "I know perfectly well that I told you all about it right back in the summer, when I had my first talk with Rosemary. The

expression intrigued me. I liked it ; and I should like to know what Elizabeth would make of it. Everything in our lives goes into the dustbin ; and then comes a sifting out. Our acts, our thoughts, our memories—everything are sifted. The useless, the worthless, the dross are thrown away ! But all that has any worth or value is put back into our lives, to be woven into the stuff of which they are made, to help with the renewing, the resurrecting, the fresh beginnings ! I know I told you, Miles, because you liked the quotation that belongs to the story : ‘ Out of the Old, the New. God’s Face is towards the Future.’ ”

“ Ah, I remember that. I like that,” Miles nodded with a smile. “ I am always pleased with what digs men out of old grooves, and old ways, into something newer and better.”

“ I am pleased too. But, Miles,” I looked back at the little copse where long ago Elizabeth and Bernard Drake had sat, “ it still puzzles me why those two who ought to have come together, missed their way ! They might have done such wonderful things as husband and wife.”

“ Is it possible they have done even more wonderful things separately ? ” Miles’ eyes met mine, and I thought, as I have thought a thousand times before and since, what wise eyes they were. “ Is it possible that if those two had married and had children, and led an ordinary normal existence, they might just have been swamped with that

ordinary existence, and never gone beyond its boundaries? Whereas, now, as things are, poor Elizabeth has turned herself into a universal helper; she has stretched out her hands to all humanity. And I gather from what the bishop's wife told you, that Dr. Drake too has gone out to serve a larger world than he would have served here, in some provincial practice. He, like Elizabeth, seems to have acquired some quality which has made him too a universal helper! How do you know what help and healing he carried to people in the back-blocks of Queensland, and the hinterland of Malay? If you believe in your own dustbin theory you must believe, too, that the best in the lives of those two has been sifted out, and is being built into their characters for Eternity. Nothing is wasted, I am sure of that. The good those two found in each other, and learnt from each other, has been carried on into the building up of both their natures; some day they will 'see, and remember, and understand.' "

"Miles," I put my hand through his arm and pressed close against him, "how supremely thankful I am that our characters did not have to be built up through separation and pain. What would my life have meant for me, if you had gone out of it for ever and ever, Amen?"

"I shouldn't have gone out of it for ever and ever, Amen," he averred stoutly. "I might have been separated from you, as Drake was from

Elizabeth. I might be taken away from you by death"—I pressed closer to him, and held his arm with a tighter grip—"but the part of us that belonged to each other would still have belonged: just as I am convinced that the part of Drake that belonged to Elizabeth is still hers, and always will be hers. You say yourself there is sifting to be done! But the gold remains, when the dross is flung away."

"You are a very comforting person," I said, "and I wish Elizabeth had you to help her. If on that day the larks sang as they are singing to-day, they must nearly have broken her heart! I wonder whether she will ever bear to hear a lark again."

"Compensations come. Pain grows less. Life helps to deaden old memories, and we jog on," my husband said gently, as we strolled over the crisp down grass.

"Thank God that you and I are jogging along together," I exclaimed, with vehemence. "If I had to walk alone——"

"You will never walk alone," he interrupted very gently, "even if I was out of sight, on the other side, I should always be close beside you. You will never have to go alone!"

Miles was such a comforting person, and in days to come those words of his came back to me.

* * * * *

Is it that increasing age makes my mind increasingly *décousu*? Or is it that life does piece itself

out in bits and fragments, and not in any orderly sequence? If this were a novel, instead of jottings from a life-time of remembrance, my chapters would fit better; happenings would happen more coherently and in more ordered fashion; less like a jigsaw puzzle! But when I begin to think about it all, it seems to me that life really does not space itself out neatly, in chapters, but far more resembles a jigsaw puzzle, than anything of a regular pattern.

During all the last years or so of our time in Branchester, Elizabeth seemed to have vanished into the *Ewigkeit*. I had no news of her at all. She had gone into Central Asia with three missionary ladies, and Central Asia had swallowed her up. I shot off my letters to her, as one might shoot arrows into the air; but whether they ever reached her or not I had no means of knowing. I often wondered what had happened to the letter in which I told her of Rosemary Denton's conversation about Bernard Drake; or to that other letter which tried to paint a little picture for her of the copse on the downs. But my wonderings were not satisfied. Elizabeth, for the moment, had gone right out of my ken; and I could only hope and pray that time and work were laying healing hands upon her, and helping her to get above the pain, which had filled her eyes with such haunting sadness.

Meanwhile, up to a point, I was immersed in the currents and counter-currents of existence in a cathedral town, and some of the incidents which

cropped up in that existence, struck both Miles and me as being very humorous, whilst some carried the stamp of tragedy. We were in the life but not of it; I felt sometimes as though I were merely a spectator, sitting in the stalls to view a quaint drama being played upon the stage.

There was the upheaval which threatened to be a very serious matter, when the cathedral organist headed what amounted to a revolt amongst the men of the choir, because a promised increase of salary had never been paid. The city was torn in two over the matter; and the members of the cathedral chapter were rumoured to be seriously at logger-heads with one another.

Miss Sternaby positively bubbled over with information on the subject; information she had gleaned, Heaven knows how or where. But she professed to be able to tell all those who would listen to her, exactly what had happened at the last chapter meeting, and a very unseemly performance it seems to have been, if Miss Sternaby was correct.

I would not allow her to discuss the matter with me, but I could not avoid overhearing an excited conversation between her and a fellow-gossip, Mrs. Browne, whilst they sewed garments for the hospital, at a fearsome work party, which in an unguarded moment of weakness I had joined. They sat immediately in front of me, I could not help hearing what they said.

"There was a frightful scene in the Chapter House," Mrs. Browne was saying in rather hushed tones, which nevertheless reached my ear clearly. "Well, of course Canon Stillman was furious, because he was in a sort of way accused of unfairness in not paying the money promised. And the meeting was really almost uproarious, everybody talking at once, and angry passions rising; not a bit what you would suppose a Chapter meeting ought to be."

"How shocking!" murmured Miss Sternaby, although it was easy to see she was gloating over these details. "When you think they are all *clergy*, in fact dignitaries of the church, it seems *dreadful*."

"Put in that way, it is dreadful," agreed Mrs. Browne. "Those men who are supposed to set us an example of Christian life, and charity, and all that, simply squabbling like schoolboys, or old women."

"Oh, my *dear* Mrs. Browne!" Miss Sternaby looked genuinely shocked. To her the clergy were a race apart, to be regarded with respectful awe, not criticised as ordinary human beings.

Mrs. Browne tossed her head. She wore a hat with plumes, which nodded fantastically when she tossed it.

"I don't see why you should be so horrified with *me*," she said. "I am only telling you what actually happened, and it only goes to prove what

I have always said, and always shall say, that all men, whoever and whatever they may be, are no better than little boys, and quite as ready to make fools of themselves as little boys always are. Those men at the Chapter meeting lost their tempers, that's all there is to it."

"Lost their tempers?" Miss Sternaby gasped.

"Canon Stillman took a masterful line, as he always does, and tried to carry things off with a high hand. Of course he was the person mainly responsible for seeing that the money was properly paid. The only person who behaved in the least as one would imagine people in their position ought to behave, was Bishop Denton."

I pricked up my ears when I heard the Bishop's name. I had long ago made friends with Rosemary's husband, and I liked him. I liked him exceedingly, and so did Miles. He was such a simple, straightforward man; and more than any other churchman I had ever come across, he seemed to me to bear about with him the marks of one who walked with Christ.

"To my mind the Bishop was the only real Christian of the whole lot," Mrs. Browne's rather vitriolic accents reached me; "he was terribly upset over all the bickering and quarrelling, and metaphorical throwing things at each other's heads. He simply said: 'My brothers, let us pray about it all,' and dropped upon his knees. That man

is more of a real saint than all the rest of the archdeacons and canons rolled into one ! ”

Someone at the moment distracted my attention, and I heard no more. I did not want to hear any more. Gossip of that description really makes me feel almost physically upset ; and then, too, I asked myself irritably how had Mrs. Browne obtained such very specific intelligence about the inward workings of a Chapter meeting ? Was she drawing upon her imagination, as was more than possible ? Or had one of the canons, being a mere man when all is said and done, told the sorry tale of the meeting to his wife, and was the wife a bosom friend of Mrs. Browne's and incapable of holding her tongue ?

I put my various speculations before Miles, and he laughed that beloved tolerant laugh of his.

“ Perhaps both your surmises have some truth in them,” was his conclusion, “ and probably a good deal of exaggeration has in any case crept in. So many people make the great mistake of setting the clergy on a mountain all by themselves, and expecting them to remain there, living in an impossible isolation. They can't remain on those heights, no living creature could. But if they step down from their eminence and behave like ordinary human beings, there is an outcry. It would be so much better if we and they recognised that they are human, and not superhuman, and that we are all tramping along the same highway, having the same difficulties, and stumbling blocks.”

Miles' view was always the sane and tolerant view. It was his way to shovel into life's dustbin all the superfluities, and absurdities, and get them carted off as quickly as possible ! He always refused to turn them out and pick them over too much : he declared they would have all the necessary picking over at a future time, and by wiser hands than ours ; and that the sorting would ultimately be carried out in the best and most perfect way.

CHAPTER XI

AFTER MANY YEARS

IT was in May that Miles and I went to Varese. We arrived late at the hotel, in fact there was only just time to wash off the dust of our journey and dress hurriedly before a most stupendous gong informed us with reiterated vigour that dinner was ready. That gong was rung inside the hotel to begin with, and then the waiter, in an excess of zeal carried it out to the garden, and from the terrace beat upon it with renewed energy which seemed almost superfluous. I daresay the noise he made, winding up with one ear-splitting bang, pleased the young man himself! Whether it pleased the long-suffering guests, was altogether another matter, but I am bound to confess it sent us all headlong to the big dining-room like sheep herded by a determined dog.

To diagnose one's fellow-guests in a new hotel, is always an amusing occupation during dinner on the first evening; and Miles and I entertained our elderly selves by doing what Deborah would have called "sizing up" the company! Yes, we

were certainly elderly in the eyes of our fellow beings; both of us having travelled some years beyond our sixtieth birthdays; and I suppose the other people seated at small tables in the great dining-room at Varese considered us old fogies hurrying down the vale of years. But in spite of our ages ruthlessly revealed by the last census; in spite of our grey heads, and a certain tendency in us both to middle-aged spread; the spirit of youth still lingered with us. Miles and I were incurably young in our powers of enjoyment; in our gaiety of heart; in our general outlook on life. And this visit to Italy—a holiday snatched from Miles' busy days—renewed our youthful eagerness.

We had been enjoying every minute of our time, from the first start of the train at Victoria to our arrival at the Grand Hotel Excelsior, Varese, and that great view of Monte Rosa at sunset, which leaves you a little breathless with joy and amazement. Miles had never grown blasé; neither thank Heaven, had I! The white wonder of the orchards along the lakes of Zug and Lucerne had made me catch my breath with delight, exactly as they had done when I first caught sight of them years earlier. Those pear trees that looked as if some master hand had carved them out of solid blocks of ivory; the cherry trees, with ethereal and fragile blossoms that fluttered down to the flower-strewn grass below them; the meadows white and golden with daisies and buttercups, the faint green

of chestnut and larch—all these had set my pulses leaping. And as our train steamed past the green slopes round Airolo I caught enchanting glimpses of Alpine flowers, which drew from me little squeals of pleased excitement.

The view we could see from our table at dinner was very satisfying. It was difficult to feel interested in soup or fish, when in the garden outside I could see beds of velvet-faced pansies, and a tall cypress over which fell a torrent of white banksia roses, and trails of wistaria; whilst through a gap in the shrubbery I could catch a glimpse of the vivid green of vines and mulberry trees.

“Quite a pleasant-looking crowd,” Miles remarked. My glance followed his round the tables, and I agreed with him.

Our fellow-guests did appear to be quite a pleasant crowd. At the table next to ours sat a charming old man with an aristocratic face, and a handsome daughter as aristocratic as himself. A young couple occupied the table beyond them, and beyond again were a mother and daughter—the latter an attractive-looking girl, with tawny hair and blue eyes. Two women in the late thirties, well dressed and good-looking, sat close to us; and there were some unattached men. Also some of those forlorn specimens of female humanity nicknamed by Miles “hotel hacks,” usually spinsters; almost always of very uncertain age, and affecting a good deal of scarf in their costumes. One meets them

everywhere. Their interest is chiefly focused upon their neighbours; and their conversation more often than not degenerates into gossip: but to me at least, they are profoundly pathetic. They seem to have missed their road in life. They have found no niche; they are always looking anxiously for something they can never find. They are generally pinched and thin, with wistful eyes; and out of their wistful eyes look their hungry souls. Miles told me I was exaggerating their plight, but in his heart Miles knew I was right.

"I like that man," I said suddenly, when in my survey of the room my glance fell upon a solitary individual at a table in the further window.

"Not a bad-looking chap," my husband answered, "and I should say the tawny-haired damsel shares your opinion of him," he added drily.

I laughed.

"My dear, he is middle-aged. The tawny-haired one is still in her twenties."

"That doesn't make much difference if middle-age is attractive enough, and that chap *has* points," Miles said with condescension.

Yes. He had points, the tall man seated alone by the window, towards which I observed that his eyes often turned. There was something distinguished about his keen bronzed face, with its thick iron-grey hair; and when having finished

his dinner he rose and left the dining-room, I noticed that his eyes were vividly blue, an almost startling contrast to his bronzed face and grey hair.

When we went to the lounge at the end of the meal, he was standing talking to two well-dressed women whose ages might have been anything from thirty-five to forty; and the attractive little monkey of the tawny hair and blue eyes, was hovering near, casting an occasional glance in his direction.

These small comedies of hotel life never failed to interest and amuse me; and I was preparing to seat myself near a group of my fellow-countrymen, when I saw a woman coming slowly down the wide staircase. As she turned the bend of the stairs, the grey-haired man detached himself from his group and moved forward to meet her, and I heard him say:

"You missed the first train?" and she answered:

"Yes, by five minutes." And then I was on my feet, hurrying across the lounge, with hands outstretched.

"Elizabeth," I cried, "Elizabeth!" And I forgot the hotel, and the inquisitive eyes about me, and everything else in the world, excepting the amazing fact that it was Elizabeth who stood on the bottom step of the staircase, her face alight with excitement and surprise.

"You most elusive and unexpected person," I

exclaimed, as she bent and kissed me. "What are you doing here?"

"I stopped in Italy on my way home from India," she said. "I wrote to you, but I suppose my letter is following you round. How lovely that you are here—what a delicious surprise! And I am late for dinner, because I went over to Milan and missed my train back. Have you met Mr. Courtenay?" She turned to the grey-haired man. "This is my very dear friend, Mrs. Hanley," she said, introducing us, and I realised that the keen-faced man had yet another "point" in a very pleasing smile.

"I am going to sit with you whilst you have your dinner," I said firmly. "I must hear at once all about you. She is a dreadful correspondent," I added, looking at Mr. Courtenay, "and for years and years I have existed chiefly on post cards. Now I mean to have a feast of conversation!"

He laughed, as he stood back to let us pass into the dining-room, and when the light fell full upon Elizabeth the years seemed to roll away, and I saw her, as I had first seen her twenty-five years before, when she walked into the ward with her easy graceful step, looking like a princess. True, her gown on this evening of May was not a nurse's uniform. It was velvet, soft heliotrope in colour, and the colour harmonised with the softness of her own colouring, and her eyes. It harmonised

too with her white hair, which, under the electric light over her head, shone like a silver crown; and the thought flashed again into my mind, as it had flashed on the day I first saw her, "She really has a princess look amongst all these other people."

"Fancy your even knowing me again," she said, putting her hand through my arm and drawing me with her into the dining-room. "My hair has turned white since you saw me last; and I am an aged woman."

"An aged fiddlestick!" I retorted. "And white is a very becoming colour. My dear, your white hair hasn't altered your *face*. I could not have imagined any living being would alter so little in all these years. You hardly look a day older than when I first lay in No. 19 bed and saw you walk down the ward."

"And that is twenty-five years ago!" she exclaimed. "You are looking at me with very rosy spectacles! Not only have all those years gone by, but I have been working very hard. You wear rosy spectacles, indeed."

"Not at all!" I answered. "There is no need to put on spectacles to see that you have changed extraordinarily little. And have the twenty-five years since I saw your ship sail away treated you kindly?"

I sat down at her table and talked to her whilst the head waiter, with whom she was evidently

a favourite, fussed round her and pressed upon her the chief delicacies of the dinner.

"Very kindly," her reply came in those glad tones of hers, which again carried me back across the years, to the morning in St. Matthias' Hospital, when she had first stood beside my bed, and I had been struck by the gladness that seemed to ring in her voice. Something in Elizabeth's voice had always given me a sense of "uplift" (I may use the word in that sense, now that it has been used in the same sense by a scholar of no mean reputation) and whenever Elizabeth spoke, it gave one a sense of confidence and cheer.

"I had most interesting work in India; I was chiefly in good climates, and I found everything enthralling. I did write to you from there," she added reproachfully.

"You sent me an occasional picture post card, yes," I said, "just enough to assure me you were still in the land of the living, but scarcely more than enough for that! And your letters have been quite of the angel's visit variety, extremely few and very, very far between. And some of mine came back to me, they never reached you."

"I am afraid some of my friends' letters to me were lost," she said. "After I left India I was in Central Asia first, and then I travelled about so much. I was in British Columbia for some years," she went on, "and the climate there acted upon me like the elixir of youth."

"So it seems," was my response, as I looked more closely at her face, whose contour and colouring were so absurdly unlike those of the typical woman who has passed her fiftieth birthday. "You look most ridiculously young."

"I feel most ridiculously young," she retorted, and her laugh was as glad as her voice. "I can't make myself feel much more than twenty-eight, though I really and truly *am* over fifty, as you know. I don't mean to pretend that my *body* always feels only twenty-eight. I don't see as well as I did in my giddy and irresponsible youth; and I can't pull upon my strength quite in the reckless way I did in those days. But inside me, in my heart and mind, I don't feel more than twenty-eight."

"I daresay you don't; I daresay you never will! You have managed to keep all your youthful grip on things. You always struck me as being so alive, and you have held on to your aliveness most amazingly."

She laughed.

"I feel very much alive, and this delicious place gives one fresh life."

"You say you were on your way from India?" I questioned in some bewilderment, "but I thought you said just now you had been in British Columbia."

"Oh, after that I was in India again for a time," she answered. "I went to relieve the present

matron of my old hospital there, and give her a holiday. Of course it was long ago that I went up into Central Asia with the dearest missionary women, into the wilderness. Now I have finished with India altogether, and in very many ways I am sorry. The East fascinated me: I believe I shall always hear it calling, though I have come back to the West for good."

"And what next?" was my natural question.

"Next?" She paused for a moment, her eyes grew a little dreamy. "Oh, the leisured spinsterdome comes next," she said briskly, after that moment's hesitation. "I promised myself a leisured time; and when the time of leisure has begun to pall on me, which it certainly will do, I shall come and worry you and Dr. Hanley to let me put my finger into your research pie. I'm sure I shan't be happy long in idleness. I shall want scope for my energies."

"I'm sure you won't be happy in idleness for long! Miles will be only too pleased to draw you into one of his many enterprises. We are horribly energetic old fogies; we do all sorts of social work, as well as our legitimate research labours."

"You call yourselves old fogies?" Her tone was indignant. "Don't dare to use foolish names of that sort in my presence. Dr. Hanley has just the same eager boyish expression he had when you first introduced him to me; he looks like a delightful boy, who has just found something new.

His alertness always struck me as his most marked characteristic."

"I really think he is as alert as ever," was my response, and I said it with wifely pride, for Miles was well in the van of the research campaign, notwithstanding his years; and he was as keen about his work as the youngest of his colleagues. Elizabeth was right, too, in comparing him to a boy: all his new discoveries filled him with boyish delight!

"Somebody said that we never grow old until we begin to lose our interest in things," Elizabeth remarked thoughtfully, "until, in fact, we leave off being keen." And with this statement I cordially agreed.

I am afraid the poor head waiter's patience must have been grievously tried that evening. Elizabeth and I lingered so long in the dining-room, asking each other questions, talking of all that we had done and seen since we met; trying to bridge the gulf of twenty-five years that lay between us, that we could not drag ourselves away. Not that in one sense there was really a gulf, or that a bridge was needed. Elizabeth and I might have met only the week before, so quickly did we fall back into our old intimacy; so easily did we pick up the threads of our friendship. Still there were links to be picked up, and we picked them up assiduously.

During that long talk of ours, my thoughts often glanced back to our talk together on a hot April

day in the past : to the man who had been the centre of the talk ; to the broken friendship, and her old pain. But I had not the courage to mention Bernard Drake's name, or to ask any question about him, until later that evening, when directly we had left the dining-room she came to my room to show me some Indian photographs.

Then I said quietly, with a little hesitation :

“ And in all these years, Elizabeth, have you heard anything of Bernard Drake ? ”

CHAPTER XII

HE DIED

MY own question echoed round the rather bare room. "And in all these years Elizabeth, did you hear nothing of Bernard Drake?"

She had been standing by the window, looking out across the fragrant garden, silver in the moonlight, and a few seconds went by before her answer came. When she spoke her voice was low, and I thought a quiver ran through it.

"He went right away, and I never saw him again," she said. "He went first to Australia. His people lived there——"

I interrupted her quickly:

"Oh, Elizabeth," I said, "your mentioning Mr. Drake and Australia, reminds me of a talk I had with the Bishop's wife, at Branchester. She knew him out there."

The colour ran over her face.

"She—knew Bernard?"

"I told you about it in a letter, but, as you know, my letters went astray; your card giving me your

address was lost ; my letter came back. But I did long to tell you how warmly Mrs. Denton spoke of Mr. Drake."

And then I told her just what Rosemary had said to me, and I especially stressed what Rosemary, too, had stressed—the quiet serenity of Bernard Drake's personality, the effect he produced upon those who knew him.

Elizabeth's eyes as she listened, shone with pride, though they were full of tears.

"That describes him so well," she said. "Quiet serenity. It has never stopped influencing me—that serenity of his. It was part of his very self. Yes, I knew he went on to Malay, and then——" There came another pause. "Then came the South African War. He—was killed in the war."

"Oh, my dear!" was all that I could answer, but she went on speaking in curiously level tones. "We had not corresponded. He thought it best to end everything completely ; and I had heard nothing about him, until—one day I saw his name amongst the killed." Again came that quiver in her voice. "' Bernard Drake wounded—since dead.' Those were the words. I felt as if I couldn't bear to think how he might have lain out there on the veldt for hours : that was one of the worst thoughts of all, the veldt and the cold night, and Bernard out there under the stars suffering !" For an instant her voice broke, but she rallied herself quickly. "It all happened so long ago," she said, "so

very long ago, but I just don't forget, that's all."

As she spoke, the years rolled back and I saw her coming into the ward on that far away April morning, her eyes starry and radiant, a bunch of daffodils in her hand. I saw her divide her bunch of golden blossoms into two halves, and hand one half to Bernard Drake with a laughing gesture and a little flush upon her face, and I remembered how young and happy she had looked, with her starry eyes and sunny smile. There was a lump in my throat.

"No, one doesn't forget," I echoed, "but sometimes new happiness comes, to take the place of the old."

She turned fully round from the open window, through which came the sound of the nightingale's song in the garden, and I saw that though her eyes were misty there was a smile upon her lips.

"Oh yes, new happiness comes," she said, "and one is grateful for every bit of it. I am not grumbling I learnt ever so long ago that all things work together for good; and I have had a very busy, very happy life; I grant that." She paused, and a shade of wistfulness crept into her voice. "I grant that. I also realise I have missed some of the greatest joys. A woman who has had neither husband nor child, has gone without the best: it is useless to deny that patent truth. But it is wonderful how fine a second-best can be!"

My unspoken thought was: "It is fine how you have managed to make second bests do instead of bests," but aloud I only said:

"You have, anyhow, made the best of your life. To have such a record of work to look back upon, is in itself an achievement."

And then we glided away to other topics, and she did not mention Dr. Drake again. But I realised in those moments, that whatever had come, whatever might still come, into Elizabeth's life, the place in which Bernard Drake's memory dwelt was a place apart. Nobody else would ever be to her quite what he had been. She still kept his memory green.

It so chanced that after I had written these words, I did not take up my pen for several days. I am bound to admit, though I admit it grudgingly, that I cannot write consecutively for as many hours as I was able to write years ago: but I admit few other disabilities! During those idle days I amused myself by reading novels of the moment, and one of them arrested me, as fitting singularly into all that I had been writing of the past, and of Elizabeth.

The book is by that clever novelist Netta Syrett; its title "As the Stars Come Out"; its heroine, a woman, also, by a strange coincidence, bearing the name of Elizabeth. The interest and cleverness of the book I freely and gratefully acknowledge; but why does its author describe a young woman

of thirty-three, only thirty-three, as though she had already reached middle-age, or indeed as if she were "stepping out of middle-age into her dotage!"

Thirty-three? Why, bless my soul, a woman of thirty-three is still young; still scarcely past the prime of her youth! And yet the Elizabeth of the novel is made to talk and behave as though she were past child-bearing age; as though she had already dropped into the sere and yellow leaf! And when a little later on in the book we see her nearing forty, no very advanced age either, she is depicted as having lost most of her charm for the other sex; one may almost say she is already descending into the vale of years!

But women of forty in these days are not built on those lines! Women of forty, much less women of thirty-three, are not tottering down the slope of age. They are still full of vigour; very often still radiant with beauty; and more frequently still, they have a charm which the immaturity of the twenties never bestowed upon them. Miss Syrett seems to be emulating the Victorian novelists, who carefully laid a woman upon the shelf at thirty, arrayed her in a cap, and left her to carry on her long and virtuous life, along the drab ways of spinsterhood.

When I was a young girl I remember reading and enjoying Miss Yonge's really delightful book, "The Clever Woman of the Family," and when I read

it first, I entirely accepted the writer's shelving of her heroine as a confirmed old maid, and imagined that the said heroine was well advanced in middle-age ! In later years I re-read the book, and what was my surprise, my intense amazement, when I found that the heroine who was depicted as staid, elderly, and beyond thoughts of love and marriage, was as a matter of fact, only twenty-eight ! Surely Miss Syrett is reverting to the methods of an earlier generation ; and I, for one, remonstrate with her. Love does not end in the twenties. A woman does not cease to be attractive because she is nearer forty than thirty ; nor even necessarily because she is nearer fifty than forty ; or sixty than fifty ! And if this statement of mine is challenged I pick up the challenger's glove, and am prepared to do battle !

I suppose that in my own old age, I am growing garrulous, for as I finish writing the above I remember a conversation which took place at Varese just after we had picked up there the threads of our friendship with Elizabeth. I do not say the remembrances that I jot down in somewhat haphazard fashion, are inconsequent, because I do not precisely mean that. They are all based upon Elizabeth, and the happenings that circled about her in those days when—after so long a separation—we met again in the Grand Hotel at Varese. But, in these later days when I am writing, memories drift in and out of my mind ; now one thing comes back to me, now another, and at this moment I remember

something which I had long since forgotten—something which brings a smile to my lips now that it comes back to me.

Mrs. Saunders, the terror of the hotel because of her sharp tongue, and the inaccuracy of her statements, seems to be sitting opposite me again, just as she sat on that May morning, when she made the remarks which stayed in my mind, and they stir me to laughter to-day as they stirred me in the past. She was a widow, and looking into her black eyes, and listening to her trenchant words, I found myself more than once wondering why the late Mr. Saunders had asked her to marry him: what attraction he had found in this thin-faced sharp-tongued woman; why he had fallen in love with her. However, there it was! These things cannot be accounted for satisfactorily. Mrs. Saunders' husband had undoubtedly lived and died; and his widow still wore rather rusty black to signalise her loss, and spoke of him with a certain lingering affection.

On that morning in the hotel, when I seated myself beside her, feeling in some unaccountable way sorry for her, she looked up from a letter she was reading and smiled, a rather unpleasant, sarcastic smile.

"Now I consider this not only ridiculous but positively indecent," she said, waving the sheet of paper towards me, as she might wave a red rag in the direction of a bull.

"What is ridiculous and indecent?" I asked. "Has something happened? Do tell me about it."

"Robert Dent, who ought to have known better, Robert Dent, who is seventy-two if he is a day, has just been *married*," she answered.

"But why not?" was my innocent reply. "I don't know Mr. Robert Dent, but if he was a lonely man, why shouldn't he marry? Doesn't he show his wisdom in marrying?"

"*His wisdom!*" Her words were tipped with scorn. "A man of his age ought to know better than to commit such an absurdity. I should call it even worse than absurd, it is criminal."

"But why, in the name of fortune?" I asked, my eyes opening to the size of saucers. "I can't see anything either criminal or absurd, in a man's marrying, whatever his age, if he is lonely and finds a suitable woman to cheer his loneliness."

"Suitable fiddlesticks," was Mrs. Saunders' sharp retort. "I have no patience with marriages after people are young. There is a proper age for everything. For instance, there's an age for dancing."

"You can hardly compare dancing to marriage, can you?" I ventured, mildly.

"Certainly, I do. Nobody ought to dance after they are thirty; and most emphatically nobody ought to marry after thirty."

"*After—thirty?*" I expostulated with a gasp

"That would shut the gates of matrimony upon a large number of people!"

"Let the gates be shut then. Nothing is more unseemly and ridiculous, than for elderly people to try and imitate youth; pretending to feel what it is impossible they should feel."

"Are you really trying to say that elderly people have come to a place where they are out of reach of love?" I exclaimed. "I don't believe such a place exists. Love is perennial."

"Rubbish!" she snapped. "Love is nothing of the sort. Youth is the time for dancing. Youth is the time for marriage. After thirty, isn't the time for either?"

At first her absurd statements annoyed me. Then, all at once I saw the humorous side of the affair, and laughed.

"Oh, Mrs. Saunders," I said, "how much happiness you would snatch away from me, and from other women like me, if your rule really held good. I didn't marry till I was long past forty, and I am so very happily married."

She looked a trifle taken aback, but only a trifle. It needs a great deal of persuasion to make a woman of her type believe, much less own, that any of her opinions or judgments can possibly be mistaken; and indeed, I doubt whether anything would ever really have convinced her that her outlook on any matter could be wrong.

"Well," she said, after a pause of a moment to

recover from that first taking aback, "I daresay you and your husband had thorough respect and affection and—and friendship for one another; that is possible; but you could never convince me that you had all the foolish sentimentality that is mixed up with young people's love-making."

"Neither Miles nor I ever liked foolish sentimentality," I answered, my eyes twinkling.

"No? Very well then. You would not want any love or passion or nonsense, you would both have been satisfied with friendship, just being together as friends," she said with firm assurance.

"Oh no, we shouldn't," I cried, "we shouldn't either of us have been in the least satisfied with calm friendship! Even men and women over forty, over fifty, sixty—in fact, I believe men and women of any ages—till know the meaning of the word passion; still understand love as something quite different from respect, and affection, and friendliness. Your friend of seventy-two, about whom this discussion started, probably feels more than respect and affection for the lady he has married."

"I doubt it," she answered darkly. "A man of his age and a woman of hers—she is somewhere in the late fifties—only have friendly affection for one another." She spoke with a firmness that refused to be shaken. "In my opinion they would have been much better advised to remain simply

friends. It was unnecessary, quite unnecessary to marry."

"Perhaps the poor man was lonely and wanted a woman to take care of his house for him. The lady could hardly, under our present conventions, have gone to live in his house, unless she married him."

"Possibly not, but why should he want her in his house? A housekeeper could look after that for him."

"A housekeeper couldn't give him the society, help and comfort which the marriage service leads us to suppose a wife can give her husband."

"Oh! the marriage service!" she sniffed, as though dismissing the marriage service to the nethermost depths of oblivion, "that service is only for the young."

"Do you know," I said slowly, "I think your idea of marriage is quite a mistaken one."

She snorted, and began to speak, but I refused to be silenced, and went on speaking myself as though that snort had had no existence.

"I have known more than one very happy marriage, where both husband and wife were middle-aged when they married. Love is not merely a youthful prerogative: it belongs to every age. A man or woman of fifty can love as passionately as a boy or girl of twenty-five: and when they love, they want to be together just in exactly the same way as the boy and girl long to be together.

Calm friendship, respect, affection, make no more appeal to them than to the young. They want the best. They are not contented with anything less."

I suppose my earnestness somewhat impressed her: she looked at me silently for quite a long time, the expression in those shrewd black eyes of hers giving me no clue to what lay behind them.

"Do you mean to tell me," she said presently, "that any woman after fifty can have charm enough to attract a man in any way but that of friendship?"

"Most emphatically I mean to tell you that," I responded, "there was never a greater fallacy than the silly old fallacy that a woman loses her charm as she grows older. On the contrary, some women are much more charming in middle life, than they were in youth. They soften; they mellow; they gain a sweetness and graciousness which they lacked when they were young."

"Do you mean to tell me that any man would fall *in love* with a woman over fifty?" she asked incredulously. "He might, of course feel, what I said before, respect and affection for her. But he wouldn't fall in love with her in the ordinary way. Impossible!"

"Not at all impossible," I maintained, and all at once a little flashing vision of Elizabeth came jumping into my mind, a vision of her as she had looked when she came down the wide staircase in her lilac gown, the light falling softly upon the

silver crown of her hair. "The whole question turns upon the individual woman. Some women have become completely stultified by the time they are fifty, and long before that. They have allowed themselves to sink into dull, cut and dried old-maidhood. Those women certainly would not attract any man. But there are other women who haven't let themselves sink into cut and dried old-maidhood: who have drunk continually of the spring of youth, and remained young in mind and heart. And if the heart and mind remain young, they react upon the body. The body retains too an extraordinary appearance of youth; not the false youth of an artificial complexion and dyed hair, but the real youth of clear eyes, and a ready smile, a springy step, and freshness of outlook. To retain youth, lies, I believe, in a woman's own hands."

"Come, come, Mrs. Hanley, you can't possibly mean that?"

"I can, and I do." My voice was firm. "We can allow ourselves to grow old, or we can remain perennially young. It lies with ourselves. I needn't give you the recipe for growing old, we all know that instinctively!"

"Oh that is painfully easy," she admitted, with something between a sigh and a groan, "but to keep young?"

"The recipe for keeping young," I spoke dreamily, my glance wandering to a bed of purple irises in the garden, and to the green loveliness of a vineyard,

of which I could catch a glimpse through the bushes, "to keep young," I repeated, "we must keep alive our interest in everything progressive and new; never lose touch with new movements, new thoughts, new ideas: never harden into a self-sufficient attitude; never say, 'Ah! in my time things were different, and far better!' We must keep always, always, *always*—open minds. We must keep in touch with youth, and its thoughts and feelings: continually be ready to go hand in hand with the generations following at our heels; ready too to see things with the eyes of those generations; and not shut our eyes to their standpoints. Directly we lose touch with youth; directly we begin to lose interest in progress; directly we lose our open minds, we shall begin to grow old. Otherwise, age need never touch us; the age that really matters—the old age of the mind and heart."

"You do concede that our bodies must grow old?" she questioned with sarcasm.

"Our bodies! What do our stupid bodies matter? Of course they must in a sense grow old. But if our hearts are young, nobody is going to notice whether our bodies are old! After all, it is the mind and heart and soul that count; and they react on the body. None of us need grow really old, unless we choose."

"Is that why so many women who, in my opinion, ought to know better, plaster their faces with rouge, and cover them with powder, to get a

fictitious look of youth?" Her tones were full of irony.

"I don't know why those women are so silly," was my indignant answer; "don't they realise that no amount of paint and powder can hide the age in their *eyes*, if they have really allowed themselves to grow old? Their eyes must give them away, even if they have the complexion of a rose, and lips like cherries! A woman who has let her mind grow old, and her soul wither, can no more take the expression of age and experience out of her eyes, than she can turn herself into a baby. No. It is useless to try and produce fictitious youth in one's face. Real youthfulness of mind and soul is quite attainable, but our bodies are bound to show signs of wear and tear."

I do not think I convinced her. Looking back now, and remembering that past conversation, I doubt whether I persuaded Mrs. Saunders to believe my words; or whether she had a faint glimmering of my true standpoint. The memory of that talk makes me chuckle even now, as I sit alone by my open window, writing down these shreds and patches of reminiscences, whilst my glance wanders now and again from the window of my hillside house, to the sea of distance spreading out to the far away hills.

How Miles laughed when I repeated that conversation to him!

"Poor old lady!" he said in his kindly, genial

fashion. "Perhaps life has soured, instead of sweetened her. We must make allowances. But, bless my soul, how little she really knows of life, or of men and women, if she believes that love has nothing to say to us after thirty! My own impression is that he sometimes says more to us after thirty, than he ever said before. You and I would agree about that, wouldn't we, O wife of mine?"

CHAPTER XIII

THE MINX

IN my heart I called her the Minx, and to Miles I gave her the same name; and although he laughingly told me I was developing catty characteristics, I knew that in his own heart he also called Kitty Renshaw a minx. She was pretty, nobody could deny her prettiness. That tawny hair of hers had caught my attention on our very first night at Varese, and to look at it never failed to give me pleasure. Her eyes were of the colouring which is neither blue nor green, but a singularly attractive combination of the two; and she knew how to display every charm she possessed to the best advantage.

She was youth personified, and I fancy she had a whole-hearted conviction that youth, simply *qua* youth, must infallibly carry all before it, though she also had too much worldly wisdom to rely solely upon her youthful charms. She flirted, more or less, with all the men in the hotel; but from the first moment I gave her any close attention, I realised that it was upon Guy Courtenay, the man I had noticed sitting alone at a table that evening

when we first took stock of our fellow-guests, that she had concentrated her attention.

"Mr. Courtenay has been here exactly the same time that I have," Elizabeth said to me the morning after her arrival, when we were all together in the lounge. "He has shown me some of the best walks about here."

Why I do not know, but the first thought that came to me as I looked into Guy Courtenay's blue eyes, was that he and Bernard Drake were the exact antithesis of one another. Bernard Drake had been fair—very fair: his eyes grey blue; his hair fair like the rest of his colouring; Guy Courtenay was dark, although he had blue eyes—those very vivid blue eyes which are sometimes seen in people of dark colouring; his hair was thickly sown with grey; and he gave the impression of physical robustness which had not been a characteristic of Bernard Drake. It was true I had only known Bernard Drake in his youth. When I knew him in the hospital his years could not possibly have numbered more than twenty-eight; whereas Mr. Courtenay was a man of, I suppose, fifty-six, or fifty-seven. But despite the difference in age and appearance between the two men, it dawned upon me as my acquaintance with Guy Courtenay grew into a friendly relationship, that after all I was wrong in thinking the two men were such poles apart; there were many points of resemblance between them.

I realised this as time went on. Something eager and boyish looked out of Guy Courtenay's blue eyes, just as they had looked out of Bernard's grey ones : the elder man, like the younger, had an eager soul, reaching out towards every new interest and discovery, whilst cherishing a deep reverence for the past, and its great traditions. There was a youthfulness in him in spite of his years. The more I talked to Mr. Courtenay the more I liked him ; and Miles declared he was a thoroughly good sort, which, with Miles, was the topmost note of praise !

As I think I said before, Elizabeth and Mr. Courtenay were already very good friends, before we reached Varese ; and Miles and I were quickly admitted into the pleasant little circle of which those two formed a part. Kitty Renshaw and her mother belonged to it too. At least perhaps what had really happened was that they sat themselves down in the centre of the circle, and remained there—set fast ! I don't believe they exactly “ belonged ” to the circle at all.

“ The tawny-haired one,” as Miles called Kitty Renshaw, amused him vastly. He said her methods were so crude. He also said woman had remained unchanged since the most primitive times, and that Kitty's ways were certainly those of her prehistoric ancestresses. I retorted that the ladies of prehistoric ages were probably far too busily engaged in keeping up the fires, and making experiments with

their first sowing of seeds, to flirt with anybody. But Miles only answered :

"Hum-m—you may be sure they made glad eyes at the hunters who brought in the skins!"

Miles had most of the merits of the model husband, chiefly because at my hands he had passed through a rigorous but wholesome course of training! But even Miles had limitations of outlook. He sometimes put on blinkers, and was totally unable to see in any direction but straight ahead! He had certain well-defined views about women, and these he adhered to with complete firmness.

"Fundamentally woman is what she always was," he said decisively, "the woman of Kitty Renshaw's type at any rate. She can no more help hunting men than the tigress can help hunting small beasts; it is second nature with her. Now Elizabeth is different."

"Different! I should think she was different," I answered with fine scorn, whilst I absent-mindedly prodded at an ant-heap in front of the seat on which we sat, "Elizabeth would no more dream of hunting a man than—I should."

"Just so." Miles puffed at his pipe, and looked round at me with mischievously twinkling eyes. "you and Elizabeth belong to another type of woman. You are born mothers, both of you: and if you haven't got babies to dandle in your arms, you will dandle some man, metaphorically!"

I laughed. It was impossible not to laugh at

Miles, when he set himself out to hold forth in this judicial fashion.

"You would be a nice armful to dandle," I said, "but I am glad that at any rate you don't accuse Elizabeth and me of hunting. As for that minx; Kitty Renshaw, well, you are at liberty to compare her to a tigress if you like."

"Tigress is too big a word to apply to her. That young woman will never rise to any grand passion," Miles said drily, "but she belongs to the cat tribe and she is out for mischief. Her sort is always ripe for mischief. That girl just plays for her own hand all the time. It doesn't matter in the least to her, whether or no she rides roughshod over other people, as long as she gets what she herself wants; and I don't fancy," Miles spoke more slowly, his eyes fixed upon a cypress tree over which a wistaria had poured a stream of delicately coloured blossom, "I don't fancy she cares, or will ever care, very much for anybody excepting herself. She is out for what she can get, that's all, merely for what she can get, whether it is a box of chocolates, or a diamond necklace. She means to grab everything she can; and she won't mind how many people she pushes aside to get her own way."

To hear Miles speak with such complete disapproval of anybody was most unusual, for a more tolerant man than my husband never lived. He was always ready to make allowances, to say:

"Ah well, we don't know everything, we mustn't judge harshly." But of Kitty Renshaw he spoke with a greater vigour of condemnation than I had ever known him show.

"She is very pretty," I ventured.

"Pretty! Of course she is pretty!" My husband knocked the ashes from his pipe and laughed. "She is a regular little devil for prettiness, and she knows how fascinating she is to look at. And some men are fools enough not to see that a pretty face may cover a rotten enough heart."

"What about Mr. Courtenay?" I questioned, my parasol point again idly prodding in the ant-hill and producing sensational happenings amongst its small inhabitants. "If I am not very much mistaken, the minx has marked him for her own."

"She may have *marked* him, but I have a hope that Courtenay is a wise man," was my husband's answer. "I can't imagine that a fellow of his age and common-sense, would be attracted merely by a pretty face. After all he's a man of more than average intelligence."

"And she is a *girl* of more than average intelligence," I put in quickly. "It mayn't be scholarly intelligence like his, but she has very nimble wits, that young woman, and I should say that when she has set her mind to getting anything, she will move heaven and earth until she gets it. Her will is on a level with her intelligence."

"To watch her stalking Courtenay will be a very pretty comedy, if nobody is hurt in the process," Miles said lightly.

"Kitty Renshaw would not care two straws whether anybody else was hurt or not," I retorted. "She is far too self-centred to mind hurting other people."

"My dear, you are not usually so severe upon youth or upon anybody," my husband said gently, but I turned on him with something of fierceness.

"You said yourself she is only out for what she can get," I said. "I am severe on the utterly selfish, and I don't believe it is wrong to be severe on them. They make life so intolerable for other people. They make Self their god. I am not at all sure that selfishness is not the unforgivable sin. It shuts you out both from man and God."

It seemed a long, long time before Miles answered me. All the sounds around us in the garden concentrated themselves into a kind of orchestra in my brain before Miles spoke again. Amongst the rough grass beyond the shrubbery crickets chirped in the sunshine; a bird's insistent voice called and called somewhere in the lilac bushes; a soft air that might have blown straight down from the majestic pile of Monte Rosa, stirred the leaves of the banksia roses on the pergola above us with a faint pleasant whispering; and presently from the cedar tree over which the wistaria draped its lilac mantle, a blackbird broke into song.

"The question is," Miles said at last, "can anything ever ultimately separate us from God?"

"Sin? Self-centredness? Selfishness?" I flung at him.

"They put up a temporary wall, yes. . . . But ultimately, can anything *ultimately* separate us from the Divine, which is indwelling? We do not know, we cannot, of course, have any conception how many æons of time may have to pass before the selfish soul is purged of its selfishness; nor can we realise what the process of purging may be. But 'at last far off, at last to all,' I take it, God comes to every living soul."

"Miles, you are broader-minded than I am, you take longer views," I exclaimed. "I expect you are right. Only, a girl like Kitty Renshaw will need a good deal of purging!"

"She will get it my dear, don't worry about that," Miles smiled. "She will get what she needs, as we all shall, as we all shall," he repeated slowly. "The mills of God do their work efficiently; so does the Eternal Dustbin; we need not interfere."

* * * * *

"I think Miss Grenfell's perfectly charming, don't you?"

Presumably I had been dozing, for a minute earlier I had seemed to myself to be in the Brancaster garden looking up at the great pile of the cathedral. And now I drowsily realised I was not

watching tenderly over my own garden patch, but sitting in a rose-covered pergola of the Varese garden, and I recognised the rather high-pitched voice of Kitty Renshaw. The bower in which I sat was in such a position that I was hidden from those who walked or sat upon the path below; and at the moment I was far too drowsy to rouse myself, or even to realise that I was eavesdropping, and the voices of those in the path below me came clearly to my ears.

"Miss Grenfell is quite all right." The man's answer to Kitty's question was very quietly uttered; it was Mr. Courtenay who spoke. I recognised his deep voice at once.

"Now you are damning with faint praise," Kitty's voice rejoined, her words punctuated by a little laugh, "no one in their senses would call Miss Grenfell just 'quite all right.' That is your favourite formula, isn't it?"

"It answers all practical purposes! Could anything be better than 'all right'?" It was Mr. Courtenay now who laughed, and I always liked his laugh. It rang with a certain spontaneous boyishness; and at that instant the sound of it carried me back, I do not know why, to the sound of Bernard Drake's laugh in the hospital long ago—that boyish laugh which had seemed to belong to his eager, boyish personality.

"I like something more definite than 'all right,'" Kitty's voice broke in upon my reminiscent thoughts.

"Miss Grenfell is wonderful, I think. She manages to seem so young."

"She is so young," the man's voice responded, and this time it was Kitty who laughed and her laugh held the same tinkling, rather shrill note as her voice.

"How fearfully nice of you to say that," she exclaimed. "We all know dear Miss Grenfell is fifty-five *at least*."

"Do we? But what does age in terms of years matter anyhow?" Mr. Courtenay's tone was cool and, I thought, a trifle incisive; but his companion, not at all daunted, went on lightheartedly:

"Oh, I don't suppose age really *matters*, in a way," she said, "only what I mean is, it's so wonderful for Miss Grenfell to seem so young in mind and all that when really she is getting on, isn't she?"

"Miss Grenfell isn't the kind of person one associates with 'getting on,' or getting old," Mr. Courtenay answered. And I clapped my hands softly. "Age simply doesn't enter one's head in thinking about her."

"No, it doesn't, does it?" the arch-minx responded softly. "I do admire her. I only hope when I get old, I shall be like her."

"It lies in your own hands," came the quiet response, and Kitty giggled faintly.

"Oh! I shall try to grow old gracefully when the time comes," she said. "It seems quite a

long way off now, but I suppose it must come some day. It isn't wrong to love being young, is it?" she added, a soft appeal in her tone which gave me an unholy longing to shake her. "I do so love my youth."

Through the boughs of the banksia rose which hung over my pergola, I could catch a glimpse of her face, upturned towards her companion, and I could not but admit that she was distractingly pretty, pretty enough even to turn a head so securely screwed on as was Mr. Courtenay's. He was just out of my sight. I could not see the expression upon his face, but his voice was quite non-committal.

"Youth has its own great value," he said.

"I want to make the most of every second of it," she answered quickly. "The minutes slip by so fast, and presently I shall wake up and know that youth is done, and I'm getting middle-aged."

"Clever little minx," I reflected. "I've never heard her talk in that fascinating, half-serious way before; she has gauged Mr. Courtenay to a nicety; she knows ordinary flirting would make no appeal to him whatever."

"You still have some time before you need worry about middle-age," was his reply. "And, after all, middle-age when it comes, is not so very terrible. Seen close, it loses its bogey appearance."

"Oh, does it?" The voice was deliciously innocent, full of a sort of eager questioning, a deferential waiting upon Mr. Courtenay's opinion, which made me long to shake the little wretch!

"Wait and see," was his answer. "Meanwhile"—as he spoke he rose, evidently determined to end the conversation—"meanwhile enjoy your youth to the top of your bent. Every age has its own joys and compensations. I don't believe one age is so very much better than another."

He brushed the whole subject aside with a lightness which pleased me. I clapped my hands noiselessly, reflecting: "Well done, Mr. Courtenay, you have sized up the minx and, I hope, put her in her place." Then, as soon as the two people to whose conversation I had quite involuntarily listened had walked away, I too left my fragrant retreat, and sauntered back to the hotel by paths which would not bring me face to face with either Mr. Courtenay or Kitty Renshaw.

At dinner that night I thought, or perhaps I only imagined, that Miss Kitty's face wore a slightly crestfallen look; that she had no longer that all-conquering expression which had more than once been a source of irritation to me. I noticed, too, that Mr. Courtenay, in passing the Renshaws' table to reach his own, did not pause to speak to them, as was generally his custom, but merely bowed, and smiled courteously.

"She showed her hand too plainly," I murmured to Miles, to whom I had told the story of my unintentional eavesdropping; and he laughed.

"A few snubs will not hurt that young lady," was his sage response; "she has an impression that her youth, her mere youth, is going to carry everything before it. I fancy she is heading for disaster. Mere youth will not carry anybody very far."

CHAPTER XIV

A CHANGE

“**Y**OUR Elizabeth has changed. She has changed in quite an extraordinary way.”

Miles sat back in his armchair, his head turned up towards the gaily painted ceiling, at which he puffed clouds of smoke from his beloved pipe. “Her psychology interests me profoundly.”

“Does it interest you more now than it did before?”

“No, I wouldn’t exactly say that. I have always thought her an interesting woman. But do you remember my telling you she was undeveloped, or rather that she would develop later? Well! My theory was correct. For some reason which I do not profess to explain, she has developed late.”

“How?”

“I suppose a fellow-woman does not see the change.” Miles looked at me curiously. “It is very subtle. To me, when I first knew your nice Elizabeth, she seemed like a delightful boy—frank, pleasant, good to look at, a good comrade

and pal, but devoid in some subtle fashion of sex charm. When I first saw her, I presume she was in her late twenties or early thirties?" I nodded, "She is now in her fifties?" I nodded again. "And now," my husband proceeded slowly, "she is no longer merely a good comrade, a nice boy. She is a delicious woman. She has acquired some new quality; she is, as I say, a delicious woman."

I opened and shut my mouth like a gasping fish. Miles' perspicacity often took me by surprise; and on this occasion I was so much surprised that words temporarily failed me! When I finally found them, I said feebly:

"How do you deduce that?"

"I see it with my eyes. I am aware of it; and I notice that Courtenay, and other men, are conscious of it too. That woman has come into her kingdom."

Again I gasped. Then I said slowly:

"Do you know, Miles, I believe you are right. At least about Elizabeth's past psychology. She used to tell me herself she was only a neuter gender; that her women friends called her a nice boy; that she knew she had no power of attraction for men."

"She's got the power all right now," Miles replied sapiently; "she is a thousand times more attractive, not only to Courtenay, but to some of the other men, than that girl Kitty Renshaw. Her age and her white hair don't detract in the least from her charm; I think they add to it."

"But how has it come about?" I asked, and Miles looked first at me, then out of the window, to that cypress over whose dark boughs dropped the veil of wistaria blossom.

"I don't quite know," he said, "excepting that it may be the carrying out of my late development idea. Most emphatically she is different, quite different, and I imagine she has realised it herself."

"Shall I ask her?"

"Why not? You know her well enough to ask her anything. It is an interesting question, and she is an interesting study."

Miles' words intrigued me. That husband of mine was a very observant individual, and I had often had occasion to realise that his deductions about people and things were strangely correct. It often surprised me to find how closely he had studied some friend or acquaintance, and with what a sure touch he could describe their characteristics and idiosyncrasies.

I was eager to put to the test his latest pronouncement about Elizabeth, and my opportunity came on the very next evening.

Elizabeth and I were sitting together in a quiet corner of the garden, just where we could get a glimpse of Monte Rosa's giant loveliness, framed by two stately cypresses. Voices floated to us from the distance; and now and again a frog croaked lustily from among the bushes, otherwise the peace of sunset time lay all about us, and the

air was full of the fragrance of wistaria and banksia roses.

We had been chatting in desultory fashion, passing idly from subject to subject. It was after a long pause in that desultory conversation that I said slowly :

"Will you think me unutterably impertinent, Elizabeth, but I do so wonder whether all the changes and chances of your particular mortal life have made any profound difference in you yourself? "

She turned her gaze from a contemplation of the snowy wonder of Monte Rosa, and looked at me with a funny little smile.

"Why, of course they have," she said, "all sorts of differences."

"My mind was working in one special direction," I answered. "Years ago, when I first knew you, you told me you were just a neuter gender, devoid of charm—or something to that effect." I leant forward and spoke eagerly. "Do you still feel you are a neuter gender? "

Her colour heightened a little. She did not answer directly. When she began to speak, she spoke with a certain deliberation.

"It is rather odd that you should ask me just that question," she said, "for, though I'm not in the habit of introspecting"—she certainly was not, nobody could have suffered less from introspective probings—"I have realised lately that something

has happened to me. I have—somehow—changed.” The expression in her eyes was rather that of a puzzled child; and there was bewilderment too in her smile.

“Changed in what way?” I questioned.

“It sounds absurd and rather conceited to dissect one’s own personality; but what I told you in the old days was absolutely true. I did feel as though I were a neuter gender, more boy than woman, with no power of attraction; no idea whatever how to make myself attractive if I wanted to do it. I don’t pretend that I was not in a way good-looking——”

“You were,” I put in softly, “but you are a thousand times more good-looking now.”

She laughed, her frank pleasant laugh, and again the colour ran over her face.

“You are a nice person who says pretty things,” she said lightly. “Well, the fact of my being good-looking in my youth didn’t seem to get me anywhere! I lacked some quality which other women possess. I don’t even now know what it was—or is. I only know that whereas once I hadn’t got it, now it has come to me; how or why I cannot tell you. Only—it is here.”

I sat looking at her silently, pondering the problem, and thinking over Miles’ wise remarks.

“You have come into your kingdom,” I burst out suddenly, quoting my husband; and she did not seem surprised at the words.

"Yes, I think I have," was her response. "I have suddenly found a power in myself that I did not possess before, or which I did not know I possessed."

"You mean that men admire you now—like to talk to you, want to make love to you?"

"It seems simply ridiculous to say so. Here am I, a woman of over fifty, and yet——"

"And yet you have entered at long last into your kingdom? I wonder how you found the door?"

It was her turn to lean forward and speak with eagerness.

"That is just what I don't know! I wish someone would explain the mystery to me. The change has come all at once, since——"

"Since Mr. Courtenay has made such a great friend of you?" I ventured, when she hesitated.

"I believe it is since then." Though still she flushed, her eyes met mine straightforwardly. "You see, he seemed to want my friendship so much; it was as though I meant a great deal to him; and I think that must have opened some new door. I can't analyse it. I can't understand it. It is just there—a new faculty, a new power. I shall probably lose it again," she smiled.

"No, you won't," I answered with conviction, "you will never lose it again. If you live to be a thousand, you will always have that subtle something which has come to you, you do not know how,

or from whence. You have got—*charm*, my dear ; and if you remember Barrie's play, 'What Every Woman Knows,' you will recollect how in the play he says, 'If you've got charm, you've got everything.' "

She smiled again ; and then quite suddenly the smile was wiped from her face, as though a sponge had passed over it.

"If only I had had charm twenty-five years ago," she said under her breath, "if only I had had it then, Bernard Drake and I——" She broke off and drew a long breath. "Looking back is a fatal mistake, as Lot's wife found," she exclaimed gaily, but her gaiety seemed to sag directly. "Doesn't it seem rather an irony on Nature's part to make me wait until I am middle-aged before I develop what you are good enough to call charm? Why couldn't I have had it when I was young—when Bernard was young—when life lay before us—when we might have had so much—so much?"

It was an exceeding bitter cry ; but she rallied quickly, and became her quiet self again.

"My dear, you are beguiling me into talking nonsense," she said. "Do forgive my outburst. What is done, is done ; and in my youth I lacked what apparently my white hairs have brought me ! If it is Mr. Courtenay's doing, I ought to be very grateful to Mr. Courtenay !"

"He is devoted to you. Are you going to marry him?" I blurted out all in a moment, with what

Miles would have called "youthful impulsiveness," and then of course I apologised for my precipitation. "My dear, how impertinent of me," I said, but Elizabeth did not seem in the least offended.

"I don't call you impertinent," she answered gently, but she flushed again, "and I think 'devoted' is too big a word."

"No, it is not in the least too big a word. That man is devoted to you. All the blandishments of Kitty Renshaw make no more impression upon him than water on a duck's back. He has no eyes for the charm of youth, because your charms have blinded his eyes to everybody else's."

"My charms?" She laughed, and I always loved Elizabeth's laugh, it rang out with such spontaneous gaiety.

"Elizabeth"—I spoke decidedly—"you own yourself that you have got some quality now which you lacked before. Very well, the quality you have got is charm, and it has bewitched that delightful Mr. Courtenay."

"Bewitched? My dear, look at my white hair."

"I do look at your white hair. It is most becoming to you. It is like a silver crown. You are a thousand times better-looking than you were on the day I first saw you stepping down the ward; and you were very good-looking then!"

"I feel exactly like a work of art being described in a saleroom," she answered, looking at me with a whimsical smile.

"Whatever you may say, Mr. Courtenay thinks you beautiful."

"Mr. Courtenay is——" she began, then broke off suddenly, and there was something of appeal in her glance. "He is really a dear," she went on, as suddenly as she had broken off.

"Dear enough to make you feel you could——" and then I broke off my sentence, feeling once again that I was probing too impertinently.

"I—don't—know," she answered at last, very slowly. "I am not pretending to misunderstand what you mean, and honestly I don't know. He has been such a splendid friend, Guy Courtenay, I mean. He has given me so many new thoughts and ideas; he has opened so many fresh doors for me; he"—she paused—"he means so much to me," she went on hurriedly, then paused again.

"Would it make for your happiness if you married him?" I asked, and she turned to me with a curious, exalted look in her eyes.

"There are some words of Carlyle that haunt me—and haunt me," was her reply. "He says we are not to seek for happiness but for blessedness; and I am sure that the most true blessedness lies not in receiving but in giving. In giving," she repeated under her breath, as our conversation was interrupted by the booming notes of the great gong, and we rose slowly and reluctantly, to leave the magic of the sunset garden, and made our way to the dining-room, and the prosaic dinner.

CHAPTER XV

BRANCHESTER AT VARESE

TO say that I was surprised when I saw Miss Sternaby come into the dining-room on that May evening would be to express my feelings in very mild language. I was not only surprised, I was what Miles called thoroughly disgruntled! Having fondly hoped that I had left Miss Sternaby behind me for several weeks with all my other Branchester acquaintances, it was something of a shock to see her follow the head waiter to a table on the far side of the room from ours—not so far, however, but that she caught sight of us before she took her place, and in a moment had threaded her way between tables and diners, to fall upon us.

“My dear Mrs. Hanley, what a delightful surprise!” she burred. “I always feel nervous coming alone into a strange dining-room, and then, to see you and your husband! What a lovely surprise, and how lucky for me that you are here. Somebody recommended Varese, and I came; and now, to find friends in the place is indeed fortunate.”

She was obliged to stop then for breath, and Miles to my intense amazement, put in :

"I am afraid we are rather birds of passage. Our stay here is likely to be short."

He had invented that statement on the spur of the moment ! Until then we had not dreamed of leaving Varese soon ; but neither Miss Sternaby nor anybody except his astute wife could have guessed that Miles was drawing entirely on his imagination when he proceeded to give a lightning sketch of a purely problematical tour in the Monte Rosa valleys !

"Oh, but you mustn't go yet," Miss Sternaby exclaimed, with her most bewitching smile, before, as she put it, she "skipped back" to her own table ; "you must let me enjoy the pleasure of your society for a little while."

"It will be a very little while," Miles said gloomily after she had gone. "What evil spirit sent that woman here ? Some imp of mischief, surely."

I shrugged my shoulders and laughed a little at his dismal countenance.

"I am sorry she has come," I agreed, "but I believe we can survive her."

"Hum," my usually good-natured husband ejaculated, "if she doesn't set everybody here by the ears. I mistrust her type. Those gimlet eyes of hers will ferret out non-existent morsels of gossip ; her tongue will set the place on fire before we know where we are."

Elizabeth smiled when, after dinner, I told her of Miles' perturbation and its cause.

"I saw the little lady come into the dining-room," she said. "I recognised the type. She will soon turn us all inside-out, but—does it matter?"

That was so like Elizabeth! There was something superb in her placid sweeping aside of possible gossip, "But does it matter?"

Well, when one came to think things over, did it matter? Nevertheless, I confess it made me squirm when I saw Miss Sternaby's sharp eyes probing and searching my dear Elizabeth's face. She did so remind me of a ferret; and I could not bear to think that anybody should act in that capacity about Elizabeth.

"I do so like your charming friend," Miss Sternaby began one morning when she caught me alone on the terrace. "In spite of her age, she is so delightful."

"In spite of her age? Miss Grenfell is not a Methuselah! You talk as if she were tottering towards her nineties."

"Oh, Mrs. Hanley"—Miss Sternaby gave a squeal of laughter—"I didn't mean to imply that Miss Grenfell was really *old*; but of course she is quite middle-aged—almost beyond middle-age," she added with a distinct note of interrogation in her voice which I quite ignored. "I daresay you have known her some time," Miss Sternaby continued,

when her other remark fell fruitless to the ground.

"Some time," I said lightly. "We are old friends."

"I should be inclined to fancy"—Miss Sternaby suddenly looked arch—"I should certainly be inclined to fancy that Mr. Courtenay is very much attracted by her."

"Should you?"

"She isn't really what you would call *old-maidish*, is she?"

"*Old-maidish*? Miss Grenfell!" I exclaimed. "I can't imagine anybody less like a typical old maid. She never would be one if she lived to be a hundred."

"I am sure you are right," Miss Sternaby agreed with seeming warmth, though I thought I read something of malicious amusement in her small eyes, "and she is so good to look at too. She can quite hold her own even against so pretty a girl as Miss Renshaw, who has youth on her side."

"I don't think youth is everything," I said perhaps more curtly than I ought to have done, but Miss Sternaby had a genius for making a sore place and rubbing salt into it. "I feel myself that youth, merely as youth, is often over-rated."

"But you do like Mrs. Denton very much, and Mrs. Groveland, don't you?" she asked with a funny little sly look in her eyes, "and they are both young."

A mental picture of Rosemary, with that limpid sincerity of hers which was so wonderful, and a picture of Bridget Groveland fighting her way up to goodness, rose before me; and both pictures were in such ludicrous contrast to Kitty Renshaw, and her meretricious artificiality, that I could only laugh. There was nothing else to do.

"And that reminds me," my companion went on, "I thought I saw Mrs. Groveland in the hall this morning. Of course, I may have made a mistake, but it was very like her. Wouldn't it be funny if another Branchester person turned up at Varese?"

"Mrs. Groveland here?" I started. "Though after all, why not?" I added. "There is no conceivable reason why Mrs. Groveland should not come here. It is a very attractive place, and lots of people like it immensely."

"I thought perhaps Mrs. Groveland had followed you here," Miss Sternaby said next, with another of her faint sniggers which rasped my nerves.

"Followed me?" I repeated. "She doesn't even know where I am. When we came away, our plans were quite vague—in fact, we practically had no plans. We merely drifted here."

"Ah! well, I dare say Mrs. Denton will turn up next." Again came that devastating snigger. "She is another of your adorers, and I am sure she won't be able to endure Branchester very long without you."

My patience had reached its furthest limit; I could bear no more.

"I must go in and write some letters," I said, pushing back my chair and rising. "I am afraid I can't stay gossiping here any longer," and I made my way into the hotel to run almost into the arms of Bridget Groveland, who was just making for the garden door.

"Mrs. Hanley! How perfectly delightful!" Her eyes shone with pleasure; she put out both hands to me. "I suddenly had a most insensate longing to see mountains and Italy, and I just came straight away for a fortnight," she explained. "I know it was horribly impulsive—but I—did it."

"I am very glad you did act on impulse and come away. You look as if a complete change would do you good."

I noticed that her eyes were very tired, and there were lines about her mouth and furrowing her forehead, which told either of over-fatigue or strain.

"I felt as if"—she drew a long breath—"as if I must take great gulps of some other air than the air of Branchester. Perhaps you will think me a fool, and tell me I ought to stay quietly there, and face things out."

"No, I don't think you a fool, and I am not in the least surprised that you long for something fresher to breathe. As for facing things out—my dear, you have done that nobly for so long that I don't wonder your patience is wearing thin."

"It does sometimes surprise me," she exclaimed with unusual vehemence, "that a place like Branchester—a Cathedral town which ought to be a shining light to other towns—which ought to hold the very essence of Christianity—should instead ignore so completely Christ's teaching."

We were alone in the big cool hall, and no sounds reached us but the chirping of grasshoppers from the garden and the shrill insistent note of a bird.

"I agree. The extraordinary gulf that seems to lie between the Christianity of Christ and the Christianity of the churches never stops surprising me."

"Not that I ought to grouse." Bridget looked at me with those pretty eyes of hers and smiled. "When one messes up life as I've messed mine, the penalty must be paid. I have no business to grumble because the bill is high."

It was a pleasure to me in the days that followed to see that Elizabeth and Bridget liked one another, and that, in spite of the difference in their ages, a real friendship sprang up between them. I had noticed that Elizabeth seemed to attract younger women to herself. They responded to the youthfulness in her, that youthfulness which held some perennial quality; and with the exception of Kitty Renshaw, all the young people in the hotel made friends with Elizabeth. Miss Kitty looked upon her, I am sure, in the light of a rival, and stood aloof; but as far as Elizabeth herself was con-

cerned, she would quite willingly have been as friendly with Kitty as with the others, had not Kitty held her nose in the air, and refused to take up a friendly attitude.

Kitty, for some reason best known to herself and Miss Sternaby, struck up a great friendship with that far from prepossessing lady; and they took walks together, and sat talking together in the garden, talking with an earnestness which I was sure boded no good.

"If Miss Sternaby *can* make mischief, she will," I said to Miles one afternoon, as, from my bedroom-window, I saw the ill-assorted couple moving slowly along the garden path, by the bed of purple irises.

Miles, seated in the armchair deep in a detective novel, grunted sympathetically, then looked up with a smile which, old couple as we were, still had power to twist my heart!

"She is a pernicious female," he said with slow deliberation, "pernicious and poisonous. Is your Bridget her mark?"

"Probably—I might almost say certainly, and it has been so good to see Bridget enjoying herself, and some of the shadow gone from her eyes. Miles, that hateful old proverb does work itself out with such desperate exactness, 'Old sins have long shadows.' I'm sure Bridget is sorry enough for having made a mess of her life; and surely to goodness (as our old Nanna used to say) she is making amends now! She spends her whole time

in Branchester in working for other people—and yet that horrid little viper, Miss Sternaby, will put obstacles in her way, if she possibly can.”

“My dear, nothing gives me greater joy than to hear you launch out into really vicious language—really vicious,” my husband said lazily; “there is a vigour and freedom about your speech which ill becomes one of your years, though it is highly entertaining.” Miles wound up with his boyish laugh, which to me always seemed as spontaneous and charming as his smile, and took whatever sting there might have been in them, out of his words.

“You may laugh,” I answered solemnly, “but mark what I say. That woman is on the war-path. When her head and hat wag so portentously as they are doing at this moment (she and that little minx Kitty are in the pergola now) then it is quite certain she is brewing mischief. It is ‘pretty Fanny’s way.’”

My fears soon showed themselves to be justified. I noticed that gradually all those women in the hotel who had, so to speak, taken Bridget to their bosoms and treated her with extreme friendliness, began to withdraw into their shells and assume chilly and aloof airs. She herself sensed it at once. Experience had given her all the qualifications of a sensitive plant; and the coldness that began to fall upon those who had hitherto shown her the reverse, soon chilled her with its icy breath. The shadow returned to her eyes; something of their

old hunted expression came too; she lost the brightness which it had gladdened me to see; she shrank into herself, shunning the public rooms and the garden.

But Elizabeth would not allow this. Elizabeth suddenly took the matter into those capable hands of hers, and furthermore took the bull by the horns. Indeed, she dealt with two metaphorical bulls, for she tackled both Miss Sternaby and Kitty!

Elizabeth and fear were not synonymous terms. She did not know what fear meant; and in all my acquaintance with her, I had always seen her go straight up to her guns, if guns were to be faced. As Miles said, "Elizabeth got busy," and first, to my immense amusement, she tackled Kitty. Without wishing to be an eavesdropper, I was again faced with that unpleasant position; and oddly enough, it was in the same place where I had inadvertently overheard Miss Kitty talking to Mr. Courtenay.

This time I frankly confess I had been dozing over a book in that warm and fragrant corner, where the sweetness of banksia roses and wistaria, and the deliciously soft air had a very soporific effect. Voices woke me from a sense of vivid little dreams, and I had no difficulty in at once recognising Elizabeth's clear tones. Her voice always seemed to me so characteristic of her. It was clear and vibrating, without trace of harshness.

"I think we had better just have this out," she

was saying, when my senses became fully alive to my surroundings.

"I don't see why at all." There was veiled insolence in the reply, and I recognised Kitty's rather high voice. "I don't want to discuss the subject. Mrs. Groveland is nothing to me."

"No, but you are something to her." Elizabeth's answer was sharp as a rapier thrust. "You are sowing evil reports of her, and the seed is beginning to come up."

"I don't know what you are talking about." Kitty's tone was sullen now, as well as insolent. "You are making absurd assertions."

"Oh, no, I am not." How I loved Elizabeth for her quiet positiveness, for the tranquillity of manner which refused to be ruffled or annoyed. "I am stating facts, as you are fully aware."

"Am I?" I could have sworn Kitty tossed her tawny head when Elizabeth made that remark. "You are very sure of what you say, Miss Grenfell?"

"Yes, I am quite sure. I do not make rash statements. I make certain of my facts first. Now, you are very young—I am years older than you are—and because of that I am speaking to you like this."

"Oh, indeed. Great cheek!" Kitty muttered, and I heard Elizabeth laugh, the low laugh I loved.

"No, not great cheek," she said serenely, "only a timely hint from someone with more experience

and knowledge than you have had years enough to acquire." ("That is a nasty one for Miss Kitty," I reflected with delight. If ever a girl needed snubbing, that girl needed it.)

"Thank you, I haven't asked for the fruits of your knowledge and experience," Kitty retorted, only to be met again by Elizabeth's amused but kindly laugh.

"You are going to get them without asking," Elizabeth answered, "a free gift! No, don't rush away"—I felt convinced she put a hand on Kitty's arm—"don't rush off in a temper; just listen to me for five minutes, then you shall go and swear at me and my cheek as much as ever you like."

"Well, really——" Kitty began, only to be checked by Elizabeth.

"Listen," she said, and something in the authoritative notes of her command seemed to have a silencing effect, even upon her very recalcitrant listener, "listen to me. You know almost nothing of life and the world—almost nothing," she repeated firmly, when a muffled protest broke from Kitty, "and yet you are daring to go about the hotel, repeating to other people stories you have been told by a spiteful gossiping woman."

"You've no right to call people names," Kitty flamed out. "Why should you say Miss Sternaby is spiteful or a gossip?"

"I didn't say so. I mentioned no names," Elizabeth responded placidly, "but as you have

brought in Miss Sternaby's name, so be it. We fight with gloves off! No, wait, let me finish before you begin to be violent." There was an undercurrent of quiet amusement beneath Elizabeth's grave utterances which made me smile. "I think you cannot deny that Miss Sternaby has told you stories about a fellow-townswoman of hers in Branchester?"

"Perfectly true stories," Kitty put in defiantly.

"Whether they are true or not is beside the point. They were unkind stories; they put the lady in question in the worst possible light; they magnified not very large molehills into gigantic mountains. Miss Sternaby, for some reason best known to herself, told you those stories. You, also for a reason which only you can explain, have retailed them to people here, who were not in the least concerned with them. They all refer to a past, and a past which is entirely over."

"People ought to be warned——" Kitty began angrily, but Elizabeth instantly squashed her, and I noiselessly clapped my hands.

"They ought nothing of the sort," Elizabeth said. "People in this hotel need not trouble their heads about what a fellow-creature did many years ago, a fellow-creature who is now living irreproachably! You ought to be ashamed of yourself, my dear."

The last phrase was so gravely, so gently uttered, that I wondered the girl to whom it was spoken

did not slink away and try to hide herself; but instead, I gathered from the sounds, that she stood up and faced Elizabeth angrily. She had a mean little character. She could not even take kindly spoken advice reasonably.

"It's you who ought to be ashamed of yourself," she cried, rather loudly and tempestuously. "What right have you to talk to me, as if you were so clever and virtuous? I shall say what I like about that Mrs. Groveland. She oughtn't to be in a decent hotel. I dare say you do like her. She's the sort who runs after men, just as you do. You ought to be old enough to know better!"

Vulgar little toad! I had a thoroughly unregenerate wish to take that tawny head and knock it against something even harder than itself! I not only saw red, I saw blazing blinding crimson, and I only wondered that Elizabeth did not rise in her wrath and box that odious girl's ears. But Elizabeth's long years of work, and her long struggles against difficulties in strange places of the earth, had seasoned her in self-control.

It seemed to me that she too had risen to her feet, and I could picture her—quiet, dignified, serene, looking down at the rude little termagant beside her.

"Some day you will see things more in proportion" she said with a gentle derision which would have pierced through anything less impervious than a rhinoceros' hide. "Meanwhile"

stop spreading quite unnecessary scandal about Mrs. Groveland."

She walked away after that. I heard her footsteps going along the path and I also heard to my no small amusement that Kitty, left behind, stamped her foot on the gravel with vicious vigour.

When I met Elizabeth next half an hour or so later I confessed what I had overheard and she laughed but I thought there was a hint of distress in her laughter.

"I hope I was not too drastic," she said. "I felt a little remorseful afterwards. I wondered whether I had hit out harder than I ought to have hit."

"You couldn't hit too hard for a girl with such a tough skin," was my dry retort. "She wouldn't understand any weapon much smaller than the big gun at Woolwich. She richly deserves all you gave her."

"I mean to say a word next to Miss Sternaby," Elizabeth said. "I will not stand by and see Bridget Groveland treated as if she were a pariah with the plague."

It so chanced that her encounter with Miss Sternaby took place actually in my presence, for which I breathed a jubilant thanksgiving!

The big drawing-room was empty, when Elizabeth and I strolled into it together, after a walk towards the lake; but we had hardly been seated a moment by the open window, when Miss Sternaby came in.

She smiled her toothiest smile as she joined us, drawing a chair close to Elizabeth, and putting her head ingratiatingly on one side, a loathsome habit of hers!

"Miss Grenfell, I am going to ask you a *huge* favour," she said; it was her irritating way to emphasise her words. "I want to know whether, when you are back in England, you will come and speak about all your *wonderful* travels to our G.F.S. girls?"

"I am afraid I am not a speaker," Elizabeth answered.

"Oh, but I am *sure* you *could* speak. I am *positive* you would simply hold an audience enthralled. Now do come, Miss Grenfell, do *promise* to come. I know dear Mrs. Hanley will put you up?" She glanced at me.

"Miss Grenfell will naturally come and stay with us in Branchester," I said; "we are hoping to have her in any case. Whether or no she will speak——"

"She certainly will not," Elizabeth chimed in; "it is not in the least my line. But"—she leant a little forward and looked gravely at Miss Sternaby, who shrank under her grave glance and seemed to grow smaller—"but as we are here together—you and I and Mrs. Hanley—I should like to say something to you."

"Oh! dear Miss Grenfell, of course. What is it? I am only too delighted. But please don't

look so dreadfully severe; I feel just as if I were a naughty little girl being scolded."

"I am afraid I feel severe," Elizabeth answered, ignoring the giggle and the little wriggling gesture which were parts of Miss Sternaby's efforts after coyness. "I never have been able to watch cruelty with any equanimity."

"Cruelty? Oh, Miss Grenfell, what do you mean? I simply *loathe* cruelty. I belong to the Societies both for Prevention of Cruelty to Children, and to Animals."

"Do you?" I never heard anyone put more biting sarcasm into those two words than did Elizabeth. "Then it makes it all the more difficult to understand your cruelty to Mrs. Groveland."

I loved the way she went straight to her goal, looking at Miss Sternaby with eyes which made me think of some avenging angel. Miss Sternaby crumpled up absurdly.

"I—don't think I quite follow you," she said, with a funny little assumption of dignity which did not in the least deceive either of us.

"I think you do," was Elizabeth's reply. "I think you must be able to follow me quite well—because nobody can know better than you know how much you have told Miss Renshaw about Mrs. Groveland."

Miss Sternaby next tried to draw herself up and look affronted, but the foothills might as well have

tried to draw themselves up and be offended with Monte Rosa, for all the effect her attempt at affronted innocence had upon Elizabeth.

"I consider Mrs. Groveland——" Miss Sternaby began stiffly, but Elizabeth cut her short, politely but quite firmly.

"I think we really know all you consider about Mrs. Groveland," she said, "but what I am objecting to is that you should have passed on your opinion about her to people here who are perfect strangers, and never heard of her in their lives. Why have you tried to injure her with them?"

"I don't think she is a fit person to be in a hotel like this," Miss Sternaby retorted, attempting to be spirited. The attempt fell flat.

"I wonder by what right you judge Mrs. Groveland." Elizabeth's voice was very quiet, but it held a note which gave me a queer little thrill down my spine, and I could see Miss Sternaby crumpling up before our eyes.

"Right?" she faltered—I might almost say whimpered. "Right?"

"Yes, right." Elizabeth's tones were still ominously quiet. "Mrs. Groveland is not suffering from plague, either physical or moral. Nothing about her could hurt another fellow-creature. How do you dare to besmirch her?"

"*Dare?*" Miss Sternaby made a feeble effort to assert herself; she lifted her head with a gesture obviously intended to be proud, but it resolved

itself into a sort of reptilian wriggle. "I'm sure, Miss Grenfell, you don't realise what you're saying," she ended weakly.

"I don't say things of this sort at random," was Elizabeth's quiet answer. "I know exactly what I want to say, and I am saying it. How do you dare to besmirch Mrs. Groveland? She is living a perfectly quiet, perfectly upright life at Branchester, *as you know*. What happened before she went to Branchester does not concern people in a Varese hotel, years later. Doesn't it make you feel ashamed?" She bent forward again. "Doesn't it make you feel ashamed, when you try to hurt another woman's life and soul?"

"Well—I'm sure," Miss Sternaby's voice began by being indignant, but it trailed into silence, and she all at once pulled out her handkerchief and buried her face in it, "I—I acted for the best." This time she really did whimper. "I thought—I think——"

"I am afraid the real truth was that you didn't think," Elizabeth said coolly. "Nobody who had given the matter two minutes' thought would tell cruel stories against a fellow-woman, and tell them to a foolish girl like Miss Renshaw."

"I didn't think Mrs. Groveland was a proper friend for Kitty Renshaw." Miss Sternaby by this time was sobbing, rather absurd little sobs, but Elizabeth ignored them.

"Mrs. Groveland is not likely to wish to make

friends with Miss Renshaw," was her reply. "Mrs. Groveland is a cultured, clever woman; she would scarcely wish to make Miss Renshaw her friend. But that is quite beside the mark. I want you to give me an undertaking."

"An undertaking?" Miss Sternaby withdrew her handkerchief from her face and stared at Elizabeth with eyes in which very unbecoming tears twinkled.

"Yes, an undertaking." I could imagine Elizabeth making use of just such stern tones to recalcitrant subordinates. "You must tell Miss Renshaw you have made a mistake about Mrs. Groveland; and you must say the same thing to the people here who have shown her the cold shoulder, otherwise——" She paused, and Miss Sternaby echoed shakily:

"Otherwise?"

"Otherwise I shall speak to all these people myself," was the calm response, "and tell them that the gossip you have spread is the revival of an old and long dead scandal."

Miss Sternaby shrank and shivered. I really felt she grew smaller than ever; and her small pinched face, with its very unbecoming red eyes, looked like the face of a forlorn ferret.

"You—you're very hard," she gasped.

"Am I? Have you shown anything but hardness to the lady you have slandered? Don't you realise your cruelty to her? I give you your choice,

Miss Sternaby—either undo yourself the harm you have done, or let me undo it for you.”

For a moment Miss Sternaby again buried her face in her handkerchief and sobbed, then she rose from her chair, looking more than ever like a very limp and wrung-out ferret.

“Very well,” she jerked out, “I—I’d rather give my own explanation. You are being most unfair to me—*most* unfair; but I’ll tell the people you mention that a mistake has been made.”

CHAPTER XVI

“ I AM NOT SURE ”

PERHAPS it was not altogether surprising that, a few days later, Miss Sternaby announced to all who might be interested in her doings that she had received an urgent summons from a friend at Grindlewald to join her there ! But, in all justice to her, it must be recorded that she duly fulfilled her promise to Elizabeth. What precisely she said, either to Kitty or to other visitors in the hotel, I do not know ; but a different attitude of mind towards Bridget became observable ; or at any rate, a different line of treatment. She was no longer shunned, people talked to her as to a normal human being ; and the shadows began to leave her face.

She had spoken seriously of going away from Varese, but I am glad to say she had allowed me to persuade her not to take this step ; and later she herself was glad that she had listened to my advice. I was glad too to have her in the place ; and I liked to feel there was a growing friendship between her and Elizabeth. Elizabeth's relations to

Mr. Courtenay intrigued me ; and I wondered, both in my own mind and aloud to Miles, what the outcome of their friendship would eventually be.

" I believe it is that fellow Courtenay who has awakened her and made her the attractive creature she now is," my husband remarked. " I don't pretend to be able to say *how* he's done it, and I don't for a moment suppose he is aware of having done anything, but he has in some way made her subconsciously realise that she is not just a nice boy and a good comrade, but, as I said before, a delicious woman ! "

" Oh, Miles, can you at last call her that ? " I was quite excited. " *I* knew, years and years ago, even when I first met her at St. Matthias' Hospital, that Elizabeth was a delicious woman ; but no man appeared to be alive to the fact. To them she was merely what you said just now, a nice boy-like sort of comrade."

" Well, she has grown out of that stage," said Miles. " Courtenay—I am sure it is Courtenay—has aroused the latent woman in her, and the latent woman is a delicious one ! "

" She was *always* womanly, always," I retorted with indignation. " How can you describe her womanliness as latent."

" I didn't say her *womanliness* was latent." My husband smiled indulgently, and I felt as though he had patted my head. " I said the latent woman in her. They are two quite different propositions,

as you will see, if you think the thing out carefully. The woman was always there. Nothing abnormal, or inverted, or any other verted, belongs to Elizabeth's most wholesome personality. But the woman in her lay buried; and for some reason that other chap, Drake, didn't manage to dig it out. Perhaps he didn't know the way; perhaps Elizabeth inadvertently set up thorny barriers, and only turned to him her most boyish, comradely side. I can't explain it; I can only dimly grope after it. But this man Courtenay has brought the woman in Elizabeth to the surface, and you see the result."

"I see that she is ever so much more charming than she used to be," I admitted. "It seems odd to say so, but at over fifty she is far more attractive than she was at thirty."

"She has come into her kingdom—her woman's kingdom." My wise husband repeated his former statement.

"But will she be able to keep it?" I questioned. "Will she lose all this again, and drop back to where she was before?"

He laughed. "She will never drop back," he said, "she will never lose the new power she has found. She will go on being attractive now to her dying day; nothing will ever take away again what she has found. She has come into her kingdom."

"Oh, why did Bernard Drake die?" I exclaimed. "Why can't he see her now?"

"She would be able to win and hold him now," Miles answered. "This new power of hers wouldn't fail her, even with him."

"And he and she were made for one another!" I cried. "They just belonged. If only they hadn't somehow missed the way to happiness, and a life together!"

"Ah, well!"—Miles' voice had its usually comforting ring—"we can't put the clock back. Perhaps, after all, she will find happiness with Courtenay."

"But he's not Bernard Drake," I persisted, and before my mental vision I saw again the face of the young house surgeon, as I had seen it more than twenty-five years before—the fair, strong face which in my own thoughts I had always likened to the face of a Galahad or a St. Michael, "he is not Bernard Drake! And I sometimes wonder whether in her heart Elizabeth could ever put anybody else into Bernard Drake's place."

"My dear, hearts find healing; and it is more than twenty-five years since the old business; and after all, as far as one can see, Mr. Courtenay is a real live man who wants her. Will she let a man who is dead stand in the way of the living man?"

"I don't really know. Only I feel I want her to be happy; and I like Mr. Courtenay, and if he will give Elizabeth happiness I hope they will marry. But sometimes I wonder what Elizabeth will eventually decide."

Before she was called upon to make any decision, a general uprooting took place. Quite an unexpected uprooting, for Miles and I had intended to potter about the Italian Lakes without going much further afield, and only a letter from Rosemary Denton altered our intentions. She wrote that her husband had been attacked by an old enemy—asthma; and his doctor strongly urged him to go to Montana, above the Rhone Valley, a place which had worked marvels for other asthma patients.

"And we are taking his advice," Rosemary's letter went on, "we are going off in hot haste; and what we want you and your husband to do is to join us at Montana, bringing Bridget with you. Won't your delightful friend Miss Grenfell make one of the party too? Though I have never seen her I am sure she is a dear and it would be such fun if we could all be in Montana together."

This was the pleasant bombshell which scattered our plans to the four winds and made us reconstruct them forthwith. Miles and I were free to do what we chose; to go where we liked. Bridget's face flushed with pleasure when I suggested that she should fall in with Rosemary's suggestion; and she was full of overflowing gratitude. Elizabeth's eyes brightened when I breathed the word Montana, and she drew a long breath of delight.

"Oh! how I should love it," she said. "I do adore Switzerland and it is years since I was there. Think what sheer joy it will be to be in Alpine

meadows, right among the mountains!" That made her coming with us a foregone conclusion!

It so chanced that at the very moment she and I were discussing it, Mr. Courtenay strolled up to the seat on which we sat and joined us.

"You look as if you were fixing up a conspiracy," he said.

"We are; quite a beautiful conspiracy. We are arranging to make a flitting!"

"A flitting!" A little dismay looked out of his eyes that met mine. "You are not going back to England, are you?"

"Not yet. We are proposing to join very charming Branchester friends in Montana."

"Branchester friends?" His eyes suddenly twinkled. "Is Miss Sternaby to join your party?"

"Heaven forbid!" Miles ejaculated piously. "She will probably stay on with those friends she left here to join." Miles eyes twinkled now. "No, we are not likely to meet Miss Sternaby at Montana, but we are trying to persuade Miss Grenfell to go with us."

"And are you persuaded?" He turned to Elizabeth, a certain anxiety in his eyes, a very charming smile upon his lips. Oh! Guy Courtenay without a doubt was a very attractive man.

"Switzerland makes a great appeal to me," Elizabeth answered, "and at this time of year the thought of Montana makes me feel a little breathless."

" Why don't you come too ? " Miles here remarked. " You are not particularly tied to time or place, are you ? "

" Not particularly." (Did I say, by the way, that Mr. Courtenay was a literary man, and that at the moment he was supposed to be finishing a novel ?) " Not particularly," he repeated. " I rather drifted here, and there is no reason why I should not drift anywhere else to which my fancy leads me ! "

" Then let it lead you to Montana," was Miles' quick response, " drift up there with us."

Elizabeth said nothing, but I noticed that Mr. Courtenay shot a quick glance at her, and that she was looking away across the garden towards the mulberry trees and vines that shone emerald green by the road towards the lake.

" Montana has attractions," Mr. Courtenay said slowly, after a moment's thought, " and it seems a pity to break up our pleasant party prematurely."

" A great pity," I agreed. " My husband and I and Mrs. Groveland are certainly going ; we hope Miss Grenfell will come too ; and we are meeting up there Bishop and Mrs. Denton. We ought to be a very happy party."

" Very happy," Mr. Courtenay echoed. " I think I shall not need very much persuasion to join you. It all sounds most ideal."

I suppose we went on talking in a desultory way, but certainly a little later we all moved from the

seat on the terrace, and strolled down the garden and out into the lane between the vines and the mulberry trees ; and I found myself paired off with Mr. Courtenay. I had grown to like him increasingly. He was a keen social worker—a man of means and leisure, who was using both for the good of his fellow-men ; and he was good to look at too, a fact which gave me a sneaking satisfaction !

At this date I cannot remember how it came about that he and I became separated from the rest of the party, and strolled away across the meadows, talking of various schemes in which we were both interested, pausing now and again to admire the great pile of Monte Rosa, or to listen to those soft bells whose voices echoed out over the countryside with mellow sweetness. I think we must have been walking along in silence for a minute or two, but quite suddenly he stopped upon the narrow little path.

“ Mrs. Hanley,” he said, “ may I ask you a question ? ”

“ Of course. Why not ? ”

“ I’m not sure whether it is in order ”—he smiled faintly—“ but I must ask it whether it is *de rigueur* or not. You are a great friend of Miss Grenfell. Before you came here, she had told me what a great friend you are. Will you tell me—quite honestly—do you think I have the ghost of a chance if I ask her to marry me ? ”

So it had come ! In my own mind I had felt

sure it would come; but I had never dreamed that my opinion would be asked, that Mr. Courtenay would consult me. I suppose I hesitated rather a long time before I answered, for something crest-fallen sounded in his voice when he spoke again.

"Perhaps I ought not to have asked you, as you are such an intimate friend of hers; but I should have liked to know what you think before I put my fate to the touch."

"I only hesitated, because I was trying to make sure of my answer," I said, anxious to reassure him. "It is quite true, of course, that Miss Grenfell and I are great friends, but—to be perfectly honest with you, I don't know the answer to your question. Quite truthfully, I don't know."

"You mean you don't know whether she cares about me at all? Whether she might by a lucky chance say Yes to me?"

"Yes, I do mean that I don't know in the least what her feelings are. She is very reticent, as well as very frank."

"That sounds contradictory."

"Yes, it does sound very contradictory, but it is a true description of Elizabeth. She is wonderfully frank in many ways; she will let one into some of the inner parts of her soul, and very beautiful parts they are! But she has a reticence through which one cannot penetrate; and I cannot tell you, truly I cannot tell you, what her answer would be to the question you want to ask her."

"I'm not a boy," he said abruptly, "not even a young man; and, as no doubt you know, I was married in my youth, and—my wife died."

We all knew the story of his short and radiant married life. It was common knowledge, and I murmured an assenting reply to his words.

"I have never wanted to marry again, until I met Miss Grenfell," he went on with that simplicity which belongs to all great natures. "Now I know that I have found somebody who can fill my wife's place. No, I won't even say that." He broke off suddenly. "Nobody can fill the place she left empty. But Miss Grenfell is the only woman I have ever come across who would not clash with her." The phrase sounded odd, but I knew what he meant. "No," he repeated, "they would not clash. Their two personalities harmonize. And—Miss Grenfell is—so adorable," he burst out eagerly, with a spontaneity for which I liked him more than ever.

"Mr. Courtenay," I said quietly, "I can't advise you about this, because as far as you are concerned, Miss Grenfell's mind is a sealed book to me. The only advice I can give you is, 'Try your luck!' She is worth winning. I myself look upon Miss Grenfell as unique."

We talked very little more during our walk. Mr. Courtenay was, perhaps, not unnaturally abstracted; and I was quite content to walk along in silence, rejoicing in the sunshine, in the soft mountains,

and the little flowers by the wayside. Leo, the hotel mastiff, a tawny beast with affectionate eyes and puppyish ways, also took up a good deal of my attention, so that I did not feel in the least dull, and could afford to laugh when at the end of our walk Mr. Courtenay said with compunction :

"I'm afraid I've been very bad company."

That same evening, when we were dressing for dinner, Miles made a cryptic remark.

"Didn't I tell you so more than twenty-five years ago?"

I looked at Miles interrogatively as I had no clue to his meaning, though as a general rule my mind could follow his without any difficulty, even if he began a sentence as cryptically as he had begun this one.

"What did you tell me more than twenty-five years ago?" I asked, feeling a trifle bewildered.

"Didn't I say Elizabeth might, and probably would, develop later in life? Didn't I tell you, years ago, that she did not possess *du chien*, that she failed in sex charm?"

"Yes, I remember you did say so."

"Very well. She has attained to both now. I told you that the other day. She has found *du chien*, she has found sex charm. A man, to wit, Guy Courtenay, saw through the boyishness and the camaraderie to the woman beyond. He fell in love

with her, and she has blossomed out, as a flower blossoms under the sun's rays. I am sure I was right. It was merely a case of slow development, and now, now that she has come into her kingdom, her rightful woman's kingdom, we ought soon to hear the clash of wedding bells ! ”

“ I hope so, oh, Miles, I do hope so ; but I wonder—yes, still I wonder.”

CHAPTER XVII

MONTANA

IS there in the world any plateau quite like that wide shelf of land, high above the Rhone Valley ; the plateau upon which the sunlight falls from early dawn till eventide ; where the meadowland is thick with flowers, and the pines breathe out their health-giving fragrance ; and the soft clatter of the cow-bells makes a perpetual melody ? As for the view which one sees from that wide plateau, it is almost beyond the power of pen to describe that great view. To those Swiss travellers who are accustomed to narrow valleys with occasional glimpses of distance, the far flung vista seen from Montana seems almost incredible ; and almost incredible, too, to those accustomed to lose the sun early behind overhanging mountains, is the flooding sunshine that pours down all day long upon that favoured spot.

The slow upward climb of the little mountain train brings you gradually to the wide spaces above ; and as you stand at the top of the railway, in the little *salle d'attente*, you look across the valley to

the mountain giants, and begin to realise that you have climbed far! But it is after you have driven through the street of the little village—or ought I to call it a town?—and are amongst the meadows that spread out on either hand, that you realise the vastness of the panorama.

In front of you to the south lie the giants, towering above the Rhone Valley which divides you from them, and I know that Miles and I could only look with bated breath at that mighty line which stretches from Mont Blanc to the Simplon and beyond! At the back of the plateau rise rocky mountains again, up which the fir woods climb; but the giants are in front of you, massive citadels, some of them wrapped in eternal snow, all majestic, dignified, strong sentinels against a background of radiant sky.

Even Elizabeth, who had known and loved the Himalayas, drew in a long breath of contentment when she stood on the balcony in front of our window and looked out towards the mountains.

"How I love them!" she said. "I am never surprised that the prophets so often used mountains for their similes. They are so steadfast, so wonderful."

"Sometimes cruel, aren't they?" Miles questioned.

"Cruel?" Elizabeth's tones rang doubtfully. "I don't know about cruel. If we choose to go and scramble about them, as if we were goats

instead of humans, we are asking for disaster perhaps. I will not own that the mountains in themselves are cruel ! ”

I think the other guests in the hotel must rather have envied us, we made up such a big jolly party, reinforced by Bishop Denton and Rosemary. We were such a harmonious party too. Everybody seemed to fit in with everybody else ! Rosemary soon had a little court about her ; and no one could be surprised. It was Rosemary’s way to win hearts wherever she went. That sweet graciousness that belonged to her was irresistible, and if ever any woman exemplified the wise man’s words “ a gracious woman retaineth honour,” Rosemary must assuredly have been that woman !

She and Elizabeth gravitated to one another, as I knew they must do, and again the gulf of years between them made no difference. Elizabeth’s innate youthfulness could bridge gulfs between herself and those of any age.

The gentians were not quite over when we reached Montana, and their blue, starry loveliness made a heavenly carpet under the pines. In the meadowland summer flowers were coming into bloom, and before we left that enchanted spot the pastures were a waving loveliness of meadow-sweet and campanula, St. Brunis lilies and ragwort, and countless others—a mingling of white and pink and gold. And every little rock and boulder along the roadway was covered with the tiny flowers

of the silene, clothing their greyness with wee rose-coloured stars.

I loved the sounds of Montana ! Day and night the little streams hurled themselves across the meadows, singing their own gay songs ; all day long the chaffinches sang their little flustered melody ; and the cow bells made deep soft undertones as the cows wandered hither and thither amongst the lush grasses.

Being a looker-on, I noticed that Mr. Courtenay's eyes followed Elizabeth with growing wistfulness ; and that Elizabeth, although she did not exactly avoid him, certainly gave him no opportunities for speech alone. She had never again mentioned him to me in the light of a lover ; he had not again referred to our conversation at Varese ; and I confess my curiosity about them grew to fever height.

"I want Elizabeth to be as happy as you and I are," I said one evening to Miles, when he and I were strolling across the meadowland, watching the gold and crimson of the sky above those mountains that seemed to stretch into infinity in the west. "I am so afraid lest she should miss happiness for the second time in her life."

"If she misses it this time, it will not be the fault of the man," Miles answered. "Courtenay makes no attempt to hide his feelings ! He would marry her to-morrow if she gave him half a chance."

"Yes, I know ; but will she give him that half-chance ? Elizabeth is not the kind of woman to marry, just for the sake of marrying ; just because she thinks a husband and a home would be valuable assets."

"Well, my dear, Courtenay himself is a very good chap, the sort of man who might well appeal to any woman. He's a jolly good sort—and good to look at, too, if that counts," Miles added thoughtfully.

I laughed and squeezed his arm.

"You blessed lamb," I said, "it does count. Even Elizabeth could not fail to like Mr. Courtenay's undeniably good looks, and I am sure she likes the man himself. They are very great friends, and Elizabeth has a genius for friendship, and for men friends. They gravitate to her and talk to her as I don't believe they do to other women. But—here comes the big but—can Elizabeth care for this particular man, or for any man more than in a friendship way ? That is the question."

"You are not accusing Elizabeth of any abnormality ? Of disliking men or shrinking from love-making, are you ? " My husband's voice was dismayed, and I squeezed his arm tighter and laughed more !

"Elizabeth is most perfectly normal—don't make yourself uneasy, best beloved. But Elizabeth gave her heart very wholeheartedly to a man who passed over years ago ; and I am not sure whether when it comes to the point, she will be able to give her

love to another man. That is the real crux of the matter."

"I suppose we can only wait and see," Miles remarked with philosophy, a remark which I could only echo; and I knew that my husband as well as I watched with absorbing interest the little drama unfolding before us.

Bridget, in the clear air amongst the mountains, away from prying eyes and cackling tongues, blossomed out into a new brightness; and I loved to hear her laugh with something approaching to gaiety. Some words of Miss Sternaby's came back to me once, when Bridget's laugh floated up to my window from the garden of the hotel. Poor little sour old maid, I remembered how she said, almost viciously, one day at Varese:

"I cannot understand how that Mrs. Groveland can laugh and talk, as if she had quite forgotten her past. I should have thought she would want to go in sackcloth and ashes all her days." Sackcloth and ashes all her days! Poor Bridget! "The sins of the flesh," Miss Sternaby had gone on to say, with tightly pursed lips and half-closed eyes, "the sins of the flesh. She ought never to forget what she has done. I can't understand how she can laugh, and live as if she had done nothing wrong."

I am afraid to say how many times during my acquaintance with her I could cheerfully have slain Miss Sternaby. That occasion was one of the

times, and remembering it now as Bridget's laugh rang up to me, the lust of slaughter swept over me once more.

"If ever anybody made amends, Bridget has made those amends," I said aloud, and as viciously as if Miss Sternaby stood before me. "I don't believe pernicious old maids like that one know the first meaning of the word temptation. I wonder whether a kind of envy lies at the root of their bitterness! However, you needn't be spiteful yourself, Penelope Hanley," I apostrophised my own reflection in the very inadequate looking-glass. "Poor old Miss Sternaby is like a dried-up bit of seaweed. Perhaps she can't help being what she is."

Nobody could continue for long to be spiteful or petty up on that sunny plateau, sentinelled by its great mountains, gay with its flower-strewn pastures, sweet with the fragrances of pines and blossoming things; swept by clean airs that were fresh yet soft—no, it was impossible to harbour petty or mean thoughts for long, where Nature was so big and so serene.

"I want to take it all back with me to Branchester," Rosemary said that same afternoon, in her pretty eager voice, "it will help to keep life there upon the heights."

"Branchester sometimes needs lifting up to the heights," I rejoined, and Rosemary said quietly :

“ If each of us lifts him or herself to the heights, Branchester will be a miniature Celestial City ! ”

I remember those particular words all the more vividly, because it was during the course of the day on which they were spoken that the tragedy happened. I call it a tragedy, although, in face of all that came after, all Rosemary's amazing courage, the word seems a misnomer. Two events indeed marked that particular day. They are both in my mind. One event was the tragedy. The other was the coming of Mr. Mason. My inconsequent pen will take his coming first ; it came first in precedence.

CHAPTER XVIII

MR. MASON

HE walked out on to the terrace in front of the hotel, as I sat there watching the light slowly slip from the great summits opposite, leaving them very dark against a background of pale green sky. The sound of the footsteps made me turn from my contemplation of the mountains ; and when I saw him the years rolled back, and I was a patient again in No. 19 bed in the women's accident ward of St. Matthias' Hospital.

What a queer faculty memory is ! Not only was I No. 19 again, lying in my red-quilted bed ! I was drifting back into consciousness out of clouds of darkness, and wanderings in strange places, and opening my eyes to look into a quiet reliable face. I recognised Mr. Mason directly, and was on my feet, holding out my hand.

" You don't remember me ? " I said, when I realised that our recognition was not mutual !

" I'm afraid I don't," he answered, and his voice, very strong and resonant, again carried me back

across the years to those days in the hospital ward, when this kind man was house surgeon.

"You have changed most absurdly little," was my next remark as, in the fading light, I looked into his pleasant face, that still showed such reliability and strength. "I have changed a great deal; and you only knew me when I was a patient, lying prone in No. 19 bed, Lydia Ward!"

"A patient?" He still looked mystified.

"I have even changed my name," I went on, smiling at his mystification. "In those days I was Miss Marchmont. I stupidly got myself run over in the fog. I am now Mrs. Hanley; and I have never forgotten all the goodness I met with in St. Matthias' Hospital."

He knitted his brows and stared at me; then his face cleared; remembrance seemed to awaken.

"Why, of course," he exclaimed, "it is all coming back to me. You got rather nastily damaged; you were in Lydia for weeks. But it *was* a long time ago, wasn't it? I may be excused for not knowing you at once?"

"You may indeed be excused," I laughed. "Twenty-five years make a very marked difference in a woman's appearance; much more than in a man's. You are ridiculously the same as you were when you took care of me in Lydia."

"Twenty-five years have taken their toll of me too," he answered lightly. "Most of those years have been spent in a fairly strenuous general

practice. In fact, I am only taking a short holiday now, because one must sometimes throw off patients and disease ! ”

“ You couldn’t throw them both off in a better place than this.” My glance went back to the great dark mountains, growing dim now in the twilight. “ The whole atmosphere here is one of rest. By the way, you will meet an old friend,” I added, as we stepped off the terrace into the lounge. “ Do you remember Miss Grenfell, Miss Elizabeth Grenfell ? ”

“ Do I remember Miss Grenfell ? ” He smiled. “ Of course I remember her ; she was rather an unforgettable sort of person. Why do you ask ? ”

“ Because she is here too.”

“ *Here ?* Miss Grenfell ? ”

I gave him a brief outline of what Elizabeth’s activities had been during the past years ; and he listened with grave interest.

“ It will be a pleasure to meet her again,” he said. “ She and I had a mutual friend at St. Matthias’. I wonder whether you remember him—Bernard Drake ? ”

“ I remember him extremely well. There was a very unforgettable quality about him too, as well as about Miss Grenfell.”

“ There was indeed.” He spoke earnestly. “ None of us who knew Drake well have ever lost the memory of him. He left his mark on us all.”

That expression caught my attention. "He left his mark on us all." My own mind endorsed it; for although I had only known Bernard Drake very slightly, although, in a sense, I had only been a looker-on in that hospital ward, I too was conscious that even upon me he had left a mark.

"He and I were at Cambridge together," Mr. Mason continued. We were alone in the lounge, seated beside the window through which I could still see the great panorama of mountains against the sky. "We went up to St. Matthias' together. I—suppose I knew him almost better than anybody knew him. Oddly enough, we had the same Christian name!"

"It struck me that his personality was quite extraordinarily attractive," I said.

"Quite extraordinarily! Even one of the demonstrators—a clever, absolutely mundane man, remarked that about him in the dissecting-room. I remember it as well as if it was yesterday. Barnes—that was the demonstrator's name—Barnes said to me, 'That fellow Drake is an awfully attractive chap.' And so he was. Men and women felt the power of his attraction."

"His smile always struck me as so unique," I put in."

"Everybody thought the same! In the account of his death sent to us from South Africa, the writer remarked upon that smile—saying it was the smile of an angel. Perhaps that comes as near to

describing it as anything can come. It matched the man ! He was white through and through."

The words had barely left his lips when the door opened and Elizabeth came in—Elizabeth dressed in the gown of soft heliotrope colouring which so became her. When she saw Mr. Mason she recognised him as instantly as I had done ; and I suppose memories poured over her just as they had poured over me. The colour flashed into her face—she came forward with an eager greeting.

" What a very unexpected surprise and pleasure ! " she said, as she and Mr. Mason shook hands. " And what a curious coincidence that has brought us all together here—Mrs. Hanley, and you, and me ! "

Our talk naturally enough circled round St. Matthias'. There were so many pleasant remembrances of the grey old hospital for all three of us ; and I am sure we did not want to commit those remembrances to any dustbin, Eternal or otherwise ! Elizabeth and Mr. Mason together had no conversation alone, although they talked a great deal ; and Mr. Mason, needless to say, was at once made part of our own immediate circle. I fancied that Mr. Courtenay did not look at him with any special favour ! It was perhaps inevitable that this tall, good-looking man, who bore his years with such youthful vigour, who obviously shared many reminiscences with Elizabeth, and was equally obviously welcome to her, should not appear to Mr. Courtenay quite in the light in which he appeared to us !

And I did not blame our acquaintance of yesterday for looking askance at the old friend of twenty-five years ago ! Not that there was the slightest reason for any uneasiness on his part ! Mr. Mason had never been more to Elizabeth than a friendly acquaintance ; and he had been married for years. Still, I sympathised with Mr. Courtenay, and made haste tactfully to let him know that the red flag of danger need not be flown !

I confess that next day he might not unreasonably have flown it, when Elizabeth and Mr. Mason wandered away together into the pine woods, and did not reappear until long after the bell for *déjeuner* had sounded. When they did reappear, it was also self-evident that Elizabeth had been through some emotional strain. I, who knew her so well, and Mr. Courtenay who had her under such close observation, could not fail to see that she was not her usual self. Her eyes seemed to be seeing something very far away ; and although she exerted herself at the meal to talk lightly, I knew her heart was not really in anything going on about her.

Later on she gave me the clue to the position. She came to my room for a chat, whilst our men-folk were still smoking and talking downstairs ; and if I shut my eyes, I can see again the lighted room, and the window thrown wide open to the Alpine night.

Elizabeth stood by the window, looking out at

the amazing stars that hung like globes of fire in the velvet sky ; and her glance rested first on the starlit sky, then on the dim giant shapes, out of whose dimness rose the whiteness of snow summits and of glaciers.

"He has wakened up everything afresh," she said, turning to me suddenly, and I saw that her eyes were dim with tears. "I do not mean that I had ever forgotten. No one who had once known Bernard Drake could ever forget him. It wasn't anything he said or did ; it was just he, himself. His personality has never lost hold."

"Then why——" I began, but she went on as though I had not spoken.

"But I suppose the years dim things, and new thoughts and new friends come along. Mr. Mason has taken me right back to the old days. We have been talking all the time of Bernard ; of their life together at Cambridge and at St. Matthias' ; of him, and what he meant to his friends ; and it seems as though it was only yesterday that I last saw him, instead of twenty-five years ago. If only—if only I might speak to him just once ! If only the silence might be broken for a few short minutes, that I might know whether he still remembers !" The passion and pain in her voice hurt me.

"My dear, I wish Mr. Mason had not come to disturb you, to wake everything up again. Why should he open old graves ?"

"I am glad he has come," she said, her voice

still vibrating with vehemence, "I am glad. It seems to put me near Bernard again; to bring me into touch. It hurts, and yet I'm glad. I dare say you are thinking me a sentimental fool, but I don't want to be that. Sentimentality was so utterly foreign to Bernard. He hated it. But—this is not sentimentality. It goes too deep into the very roots of me. It belongs to the heart of my life."

That phrase was arresting, "It belongs to the heart of my life"!

"I only feel," I answered with diffidence, "that we have to go on. We can't stand still, and spend too much time in regretting a past that is past."

"Oh, don't think I want to spend time in regrets," she exclaimed. "I agree with you, one has no right to waste time over what is done and over. But—I believe both Mr. Mason and I get comfort—a queer, real sort of comfort from dipping into the past; from remembering the man who meant so much to us both. Mr. Mason says Bernard was a kindling inspiration to him. To me he was the same. I ought not to have bothered you to-night, but I felt in a sort of turmoil, and I wanted to talk about it all to you."

She was silent for a moment, looking at the starry wonder of the night; then she burst out:

"I can't believe it was just an end for Bernard on the veldt; I can't believe he just went out! He must be living somewhere still. He must be."

The yearning in her voice, the intense human

yearning "ached me" (as a little nephew of mine used to say), and I crossed to her side and put my hand on hers, looking out with her at the great still mountains and the wide sky sown thick with stars.

"Elizabeth," I said quietly, "I am sure he has not gone out into nothingness. Such a personality as his must be living on, working on in another life. 'Somewhere in God's great Universe'—you know those lines?" She shook her head, and again I saw that her eyes were misty with tears. "Listen," I said, "I know that verse by heart. It has often comforted me."

There were tears on her face when I had finished, but she smiled too.

"How can I cease to pray for thee? Somewhere
In God's wide Universe thou art to-day.
Can He not reach thee with his tender care?
Can He not hear me when for thee I pray?
Somewhere thou livest and hast need of Him;
Somewhere thy soul sees higher heights to climb,
And somewhere too there may be valleys dim
Which thou must pass, to reach the heights
sublime.
Then all the more because thou canst not hear
Poor human words of blessing will I pray.
Oh true, brave heart, God bless thee, wheresoe'er
In God's wide Universe thou art to-day."

"Those are words of good cheer," she said. "In my heart I am sure too that Bernard is somewhere

in God's wide Universe to-day—God couldn't have snuffed him out! Think of the waste of it," she added whimsically.

"Shall I tell you what I think?" I said slowly. "I think—no—I more than think I am sure that you and Bernard Drake in some subtle way belonged to one another. Somehow—I cannot tell how—you missed your way to happiness and a life together."

"Yes, somehow we missed the way," she said.

"But I believe there was some special tie between you. I believe the special tie still holds. I believe Bernard Drake is still near you, taking care of you, helping and watching over you."

"You think *that*?" she said, rather breathlessly, a wonderful light shining in her eyes.

"I believe it—I more than think it," was my firm reply. "Some people would call me fanciful, absurd—perhaps even mad, for owning to such a belief. But I am fairly indifferent about people's opinion of me; and my conviction about you and Bernard Drake is a very fixed one."

She looked at me steadily; a smile wavered over her face.

"You believe those who have passed over can come back to help us?" she asked.

"I believe they come whenever we need them. I am sure their life is a very full one; they have work to do—a great deal of work, but

directly someone they love needs them, they come."

"That thought gives me a wonderful sense of hope and courage," she said. "I wish I knew——" She broke off, then went on quickly: "I wish I could ask Bernard's advice now. I wish I knew what he would advise. I feel as if I were groping—not sure what I ought to do."

At that moment Miles opened the door, and my conversation with Elizabeth perforce came to an end. But I felt it was only postponed. She plainly intended to tell me what was troubling her—and I was right.

The next morning, when all the men of our party had departed at cockcrow for a long expedition to Montana's special glacier, Elizabeth came to the table in the lounge where I was trying, and failing, to write letters. Who could do anything so futile as write a letter, when at every moment some scene-shifting went on in the great view outside, and you could only sit back, and watch the sunlight on the snow, or the shadows sweep across the mountainside; or gaze at cloud effects, and the changing colours of woodland, and peak, and valley?

"If you are not too busy, will you come out and have a talk?" Elizabeth said, and I detected an unusual restlessness about her.

"Of course I will," was my prompt answer, as I joyfully scrambled my correspondence into my

letter-case and pushed back my chair. "Writing imbecile letters in front of that view is a sort of blasphemy."

We walked away from the hotel almost in silence, taking a path to a corner of the woods which we both loved; and having reached a clearing from which the pine trees had swept back, we sat down on the grass, amongst which gentians here and there lifted their vividly blue faces. From somewhere on the mountain-side came the soft melody of the cow-bells; in the undergrowth nearby a chaffinch sang, and a few feet away a stream went murmuring and tinkling on its way down to the meadowland below.

"What a place of peace," Elizabeth exclaimed, "just the right place in which to make a decision."

"A decision?"

"Yes. I have asked you to come out with me to-day because I must make up my mind and I thought you would help me!"

"My dear, if ever there was a human being completely capable of making up her own mind without help, you are that human being," I answered, with mild sarcasm.

"I can generally make decisions without much difficulty," she admitted, "but I am faced with a problem now which I should like to put before you. You are so sane and wise. You know me well; you knew Bernard Drake; and you know Guy Courtenay."

"Mr. Courtenay? Has he—is he——?"

"Yesterday afternoon he asked me to marry him, and I—said I must think it over. My mind was cramful of Bernard; of all that Mr. Mason had been saying during our talk in the morning. My mind was full of Bernard," she repeated her words, "I could not answer Guy Courtenay. But he will want an answer soon."

"You and he are great friends?" It was a question, but at the same time an assertion.

"Yes, we are great friends. He has done so much for me: given new life to my mind and intellect; given me a new outlook in so many ways. I sometimes think he has developed me."

"Turned you from a nice boy and comrade into a delicious woman," I replied absently. Miles' words pushed out of the recesses of my soul-consciousness into conscious utterance; and only Elizabeth's stare and exclamation shook off my dreaminess and made me realise what I had said.

"What *do* you mean?" she questioned, and of course I had to make a clean breast of it and explain my remark.

"What a very wise seer Dr. Miles is," Elizabeth exclaimed, leaning forward eagerly. "I don't wish to sit here and discuss my own character, but really it is remarkable how well that beloved husband of yours has understood what has puzzled me. In my youth I never found that men wanted more

from me than comradeship and friendship; now they find me——”

“A delicious woman,” I put in mischievously, and she flushed rosily in a charming way she had.

“But why did it come too late?” she cried. “If only I had had the power when I was young, Bernard might have shared my kingdom with me.”

“If you had lived your life exactly as you would have chosen to live it, I wonder whether you would have turned into the woman you are?” I mused, looking at her beautiful, troubled face. “Elizabeth, with all the faith that is in me, I believe you have gained, not lost, by living—not the life you would perhaps have chosen to live, but the life that came to you to live! You have learnt so much in all these years. You have spread out your hands and your heart to serve always, everywhere. If you had had your own wish, your life might have narrowed itself down to your own home and husband and children. As it is, you have gone out to help humanity, and you yourself have become deeper, wider, bigger in that wider life.”

“You do temper the wind to the shorn lamb,” Elizabeth said with a smile. “You and Dr. Miles shower kindness upon me, and I think I ought to be ashamed of myself for worrying you with my tiresome questions.”

“You never worry me, and I want to help you to do what is happiest and best for your own life.”

"And for Guy Courtenay too? I must do what is best for him."

"Certainly you must."

"I can't quite see what is right to do." Elizabeth's hand softly touched a lovely little gentian flower with a caressing touch.

"You care a good deal for Mr. Courtenay?" I ventured the question, and Elizabeth looked at me frankly.

"I care for him a very great deal," she said; "he made my time at Varese delightful. We have so much in common; we are such good companions, and——"

"And Mr. Courtenay is very much in love with you," I said softly.

"Then is it fair of me to take so much from him, when I know I am not giving him all he is giving me? Is it fair either to him or to Bernard? I do care very much for Guy Courtenay. He tells me I could make his life happy if I marry him. But I knew before—and I know with even more certainty now, since my talk with Mr. Mason—that nobody can ever come near Bernard in my heart. If"—she paused, and looked down the long slopes of pine trees, a curious little smile upon her face—"if I saw Bernard Drake and Guy Courtenay walking up that little path towards me, do you think I should hesitate for one moment—for one second—as to which of the two men I would hold out my hand?"

"If you can make Mr. Courtenay happy, and if you can find a measure of joy with him, is it fair either to him or to yourself to allow the past to spoil the present, to let a dead hand come between you and a life of usefulness and happiness?"

"Not a dead hand—a living hand," Elizabeth said softly. "Last night I knew with a certainty there is no gainsaying that Bernard has not gone right away! There is no death——" A curiously rapt look was in the eyes she turned to me; and struck suddenly by a likeness, I put my hand on hers and said quietly:

"Elizabeth! Your eyes make me think of Bernard Drake's eyes. There is the same expression in them that there was in his—a look of sincerity and serenity."

She drew in her breath sharply, and a great joy leapt into her glance.

"I am glad you can tell me that," she said. "If anything in me was like him, I should be glad and proud."

"Elizabeth, doesn't it strike you that he would want you to have a happy life, in the best way in which you can find happiness? Still more, wouldn't he like you to *give* happiness, if it is in your power?"

She looked at me thoughtfully.

"You mean he might like me to marry Guy Courtenay?" she asked.

"Would he not perhaps like you to have the fullest life possible, and to help someone else to

have a full life too? Assuming, that is to say, that you care enough for Mr. Courtenay to find happiness with him, and assuming that he knows all about Mr. Drake? ”

“ I believe I was coming myself to the same conclusion,” she said, her fingers again touching one of the gentian flowers caressingly. “ I wanted to know what you would think ; and I am going to think it all out again to-day, and give Guy my answer to-morrow.”

“ If you say Yes to him, he will be a lucky man,” I burst out impulsively. “ I hope he will fully realise his amazing good fortune ! ”

“ Most prejudiced person with rose-coloured spectacles, I hope he won't begin by putting me on to a pedestal, from which I should immediately fall down with a thud ! I shall do my utmost to make him understand that I am a most ordinary everyday woman—cramful of faults and cranks and fads ; much too old, as a matter of fact, to change her style of living.”

“ Flapdoodle ! ” was my polite rejoinder, which made us both laugh and brought us down to common earth. “ Nothing will make you ordinary, and you haven't the ghost of a crank or fad in your whole composition ! If you do decide to marry Mr. Courtenay—and frankly, I hope you will—he will be a most fortunate man, and I am sure would say I was speaking the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.”

CHAPTER XIX

TRAGEDY

I AM always glad to remember that the tragedy which broke over our little party did not break until two days later; and I believe we were at our gayest the day before the accident happened.

Mr. Mason had become one of us in the most delightful way; he fitted in with every member of our circle, and he was Rosemary's devoted slave. He was not unique in that particular; for everyone who came within Rosemary's orbit also became her slave. She drew people to her—men and women alike—in a way entirely her own. By that I do not mean that she tried to attract her fellow-creatures, or to make them like her. She did it without her own volition, by the force of her gracious personality. The loving sweetness of her nature drew others to her and awoke love in them.

The afternoon, the very gay afternoon of which I speak, was one of those radiant days which can only be described in superlatives. From morn till night the sun poured a flood of radiance upon the plateau, and the snows upon our great mountains

shone with dazzling glory. The wind that rippled through the woods came singing from the south, and the air was fragrant with the pungent sweetness of pine trees and of the flowers in the meadows below.

Mr. Courtenay and Elizabeth wandered away together in the morning, and my heart went with them. Miles teased me and told me I was a sentimental old hen with one precious chick. But I told him a chick like Elizabeth was one to be watched over with pride and many cluckings; also that I knew perfectly well he was following every winding path along which she and Mr. Courtenay walked, with just as much interest as I was doing myself!

Miles and I were close to the door of the hotel when they came back—and Elizabeth's eyes told me that all was well, even before she took my hand and gave it a very tight squeeze. But if I had not seen the truth in Elizabeth's eyes, Mr. Courtenay's face flaunted it abroad! It was almost as if he had lifted a flag, and were shaking it at us! Looking at him, at the deep happiness in his eyes and smile, I knew that Elizabeth's decision had been more than justified. To have given such joy to another human being was worth very much!

Other people joined us. There was no opportunity just then to hear the news in detail; but at lunch time Miles lifted his glass of Beaune and looked across at Elizabeth with a significant raising

of the eyebrows, and her pretty flush and laugh sufficiently answered his question in the affirmative.

I went up to her room after lunch and found her in her favourite place beside the open window, her gaze fixed upon the mountains she loved.

"I hoped you would come," she said, bending to kiss me. "I felt as if I wanted a nice mother person like you to come and kiss me and say 'God bless you.'"

"I do say 'God bless you' from the bottom of my heart; and I am so glad, Elizabeth, for of course it is all right? I am so glad."

"Yes—it is all right," she answered slowly, "if by all right you mean that I've promised to marry Guy Courtenay. I have promised—and——"

"You have filled his cup of joy to overflowing," I broke in. "He looks radiant. Elizabeth, to make anybody as happy as you have made him is well worth while!"

"I think it is," she smiled. "I've told him the simple truth, just as I told it to you, and he is ready to take me on those terms. It was so strange, but all the time I was talking to him it was as if Bernard was putting into my mind the words I was to say! I know that I am right now. I know that I can help Guy with his work and give him happiness, and that he and I together can help on the work of the world."

"I *am* glad," I said.

"It doesn't mean that I shall forget Bernard,

or that he will be less to me, or with me," she went on very simply, "but I think," she smiled, "all the lesser part of my love for him—the bodily part—will go into the Eternal Dustbin; the spiritual part, the part that matters most, will go on for always."

She said no more about Bernard Drake. She slid immediately into telling me that Mr. Courtenay clamoured for an early marriage, and that they would live chiefly in town, though probably travelling about a good deal.

"It sounds the ideal life for you," were my parting words as I bade her good night; "and when Miles and I get back to London—which some day we shall presumably do—it will be delightful to feel you are near us, in the best village of all villages!"

Our little party that evening brimmed over with cheerfulness; everybody was pleased about the engagement; and Mr. Courtenay and Elizabeth were the centre, not only of our group, but of all our fellow-guests in the hotel. Elizabeth had made herself very popular, and Mr. Courtenay scarcely less so; and from the proprietor to the waitresses, the whole population of the hotel rejoiced in their rejoicing.

The evening was the happiest of all our pleasant evenings; but it was also the last happy one, for the next day the accident happened—and a cloud of sorrow swept down upon our lighthearted gaiety.

We started so merrily for our walk, such a jolly party of us, to go up a gorge which we were all anxious to explore ; and I can remember still how brightly we all talked and laughed, as we climbed the steep path which was of such terrifying narrowness, between a precipice on one side and sheer rocky heights on the other. I am not sure that we all quite liked that narrow path ! I know I did not, and that I was thankful to keep very close behind Miles, holding on surreptitiously and ignominiously to his coat-tails ! Rosemary seemed to have no fear, and I liked to watch her slim figure moving along with easy, springing steps and graceful movements. She was so upright, so bubbling over with life, so full of freshness and vigour, that it was a pleasure to see her. And yet—it was Rosemary who fell !

We had climbed to the top of the gorge, and seen the water tumbling far below over the rocks ; we had rested and lunched there ; and then we began the descent, still all talking and laughing, with gay hearts. I was walking just ahead of Miles—so that he could now and then lay a steadying hand upon my arm ; and Rosemary was in front of me, still walking with that free walk of hers, which made someone say : “ She walks as if she couldn’t help walking ! ”

What it was that actually happened we could not realise at the moment. It all seemed like an awful dream ; it happened in the flash of a

second. At one moment Rosemary was there, close ahead of me ; in the next moment she was gone ! With nightmare suddenness she vanished, just vanished from our sight, and there was no sound nor cry. Then I realised that a gulf had opened right in front of my feet ; that in another second I should be precipitated down what looked like a bottomless abyss, and I stood stock still, staring and white, shaking like an aspen leaf. Miles drew me back. Miles, looking over my shoulder, saw the gulf that yawned in front of us, and with a sharp exclamation he drew me back ; and I saw the Bishop on the far side of the fissure that seemed to have opened between us, looking at it with a grey face of horror.

Rosemary had vanished—that was the only certainty that emerged from the sense of nightmare dismay wrapping round us all ; Rosemary had vanished ! Where a few minutes before there had been a path—narrow, to be sure, but still a path—now there was a gulf separating the pathway on which we stood from that on which the Bishop was standing, like a statue with a face of frozen despair. Only the merest ledge still jutted out from the sheer rock on our right ; a ledge which even a chamois might have shrunk from attempting.

Somebody in the rear—I think it was Mr. Courtenay—called out to ask what had happened ; and when Miles tried brokenly to explain, he called back that there was another way round, that we

must return on our tracks to the head of the gorge and descend by that other way.

"The ground must have crumbled under her feet," he said, as with immense caution he crept along our single file to the place where I stood, "the path simply gave under her."

"She never called out. She never uttered a sound," I said. The words jerked from me almost without my own volition. "She didn't cry out for help."

"Poor soul! There wasn't time," Mr. Courtenay answered; and, as he looked across at the Bishop, still standing stock still beyond the gulf, a great pity filled his eyes. "Go on down to the village," he said to him, and he had to repeat the words very loudly and clearly before the Bishop, in his dazed misery, could take in their meaning. "Don't give up hope," Mr. Courtenay went on, speaking more slowly and clearly than before; "go to the village and get help. We will come as quickly as we can, but we must go round the other way."

"Hope?" The Bishop had caught that one word. Some of the frozen despair left his face. "Hope?" he repeated.

"Yes"—Mr. Courtenay's voice was quite firm—"don't give up hope. Go quickly down and tell them what has happened. Bring back helpers."

There was no need for further words. The Bishop went on down the steep descent at a break-neck pace; and Mr. Courtenay, lying flat down

upon the path, dragged himself close to the ledge and peered into the abyss below. But he could see no trace of Rosemary! He rose to his feet again and shook his head ominously.

"We can do nothing in any case from up here," he said. "If anything can be done, it must be done from the bottom of the precipice, not from here."

Obviously he was right. The precipice was far too sheer to be manipulated from above. If anything could possibly be done under the circumstances, it must be done from below. We turned back upon our tracks, as Mr. Courtenay directed. We were all ready enough to follow his lead—and wearily, with sick hearts, we climbed that dreadful path, to the place where an hour or so before we had picnicked so gaily.

As I looked round at the little clearing where we had sat amongst the rocks, talking and laughing whilst we ate our lunch, my heart was like lead within me; and I only gave half attention to what Miles and Mr. Courtenay were saying to one another in low earnest voices. I believe Mr. Courtenay had some scheme in his mind for trying to climb from where we were down to the bed of the torrent, but my husband negatived this with all his might, and finally succeeded in showing the other man that the risks involved would be both futile and unjustifiable.

Mr. Courtenay yielded to persuasion, and we

next began to make our slow descent by an older and rougher path than that by which we had come up the gorge. It was a very perilous pathway too ; for though it did not skirt a precipice, it wound its way through woods, and its steepness was more like the side of a house than any pathway I had ever before traversed. Its roughness too was inconceivable. Stones and young boulders strewn its surface and rolled from under our feet in terrifying fashion. At every step one felt that it would be easy enough to slip and roll down too, with the stones that gathered momentum rapidly, and went headlong into the woodland depths. We slipped, and slid, and crawled and crept down that path, taking an intolerably long time to cover the distance ; and I think we all felt battered and shaken by the time we reached the village.

The Bishop had long preceded us, and already he had started back to the gorge with a search party to find Rosemary. Our other three men naturally enough followed them ; and Bridget, Elizabeth and I, a forlorn trio, were left to wait in that suspense which is perhaps the hardest thing in the world to endure patiently.

Our trouble was shared by the whole community, and I shall never forget the kindness that was showered upon us. The sun was already sinking in a crimson ball towards the mountains in the far west before the vanguard of the search party

appeared, Mr. Courtenay and Miles a few paces ahead of the rest.

"They have found her," Miles said gravely. "No, she is not dead," he answered the expression on my face, for I did not speak. "Mason is behind, with her and the others. She is not conscious, but she is alive. Of course, Mason cannot tell yet what her injuries are, but she is badly hurt."

"How——" I began, and again Miles answered my question before I put it.

"It seems she was found on a ledge half-way down the precipice. Some bushes and an outcrop of rocks broke her fall. They had terrible difficulty in getting her up, but they did it at last."

Miles himself looked completely exhausted, and I heard afterwards that he had taken his full share in the difficult work of rescue. Long before the remainder of the search party arrived we had Rosemary's room ready for her. Elizabeth was there to use all her nursing knowledge, and a doctor was waiting, so that by the time the sad little procession wound slowly into sight, all that could be done for her was done.

She lay very still upon the stretcher, her eyes closed, her face the colour of ashes; but she was alive—at least there was that ground for thankfulness! She was alive. My heart ached for her husband. He looked as if all the joy of his life had been wiped out; and the misery in his eyes was pitiful. But he was very quiet, very brave.

Elizabeth told me afterwards that he had helped her undress Rosemary as skilfully and tenderly as any woman could have done.

Elizabeth was in command in the sick-room. She had taken her place there naturally and simply, and the doctor told me afterwards that in all his experience he had never come across a nurse like her, which I could well believe!

Bridget and I, with Miles and Mr. Courtenay, sat and waited in a private sitting-room the hotel manager had thoughtfully put at our disposal; and although we now and then talked, our thoughts were in that room where the local doctor and Mr. Mason were finding out the extent of Rosemary's injuries.

It seemed as though hours and hours had passed since we saw her carried into that room, before the door of our sitting-room opened and Mr. Mason came in.

"We have telephoned to Berne for a specialist," he said, "but I think Dr. Thompson and I have really found out all there is to find."

His face and manner told us that all was far from well; and he went on to explain that, although they hoped and believed Rosemary would not die, they were also convinced that she would never walk again. Their verdict was verified next day by the surgeon from Berne—a keen-eyed brown-bearded man who, like all the Swiss doctors I have come across, gave one an impression of

reliability and wisdom. His diagnosis tallied exactly with that of the two Englishmen; and I believe he was one of the greatest authorities in Europe. He said that he felt sure Rosemary would recover consciousness and live; that indeed there was no reason to suppose she would not live for many, many years; but—(and oh, it was so terrible when one visualised the Rosemary we knew, so brimming over with life and vigour)—her lower limbs would be useless. She would practically always be an invalid; she would never walk again!

CHAPTER XX

A VALIANT SOUL

MILES' work prevented us from staying out of England much longer; but before we left Montana I was allowed to see Rosemary, now fully restored to consciousness and able to talk to her friends for an hour or so at a time. The stillness of her body, that had been so full of vibrating life, brought a lump into my throat; but her valiant eyes, and the smile with which she greeted me, made me realise that behind those shining eyes of hers there was a valiant soul.

"Wasn't it dreadfully stupid of me to slip down and spoil our picnic!" Those were the words with which she greeted me. "Only I didn't exactly slip," she went on quaintly, "it was the path that slipped, not I! Just as I made a step forward the actual earth under me gave way, and I hadn't time to do anything but go where it carried me!"

"Rosemary, you are wonderful!" was all that I could find to say, and I said it in such a shaky voice that she put out her hand towards me with a little laugh.

"I'm not a bit wonderful," she said, "but it is no good to lie here and weep, is it? I'm the spilt milk over which it is useless to cry. It might have been a thousand times worse," she added, and the gay inflection in her voice made me choke. "I'm glad I'm still in this dear, beautiful world; there *is* so much I want to learn and do before I go on. And I am planning out with Val all I shall still be able to do, even though my silly legs have struck work."

I simply could not utter a syllable. If I had spoken, I should inevitably have howled, which was the last thing I wished to do; and I believe Rosemary understood my dilemma, for she went on talking in that gay little voice which pulled at my heartstrings.

"Val says he will try to get a house somewhere on the downs, if I find the house in the Close too shut in—but I am divided in my mind about it. I do love the downs, the great spaces; but then I love being near the Cathedral, and hearing the chimes, and watching those busy jackdaws and rooks. We shall see. When Val gets me home, we will make up our minds. I am going to be most tremendously busy. My hands and arms are intact, and I can do a lot with them. Isn't it a good thing my legs were spoilt, and not my arms?"

Every time I saw her it seemed to me that it was she who comforted and upheld us, rather than the reverse side of the picture; and Elizabeth said

exactly the same thing. She, like me, thought Rosemary was wonderful.

"She has never grumbled once, not once," Elizabeth said. "The other day she was vigorous, full of eagerness and vitality. She is struck down in the heyday of her youth, all in a minute, into a permanent invalid—and she just laughs!"

That was the wonder of it to all of us—to her husband, I verily believe, almost as much as to us—she just laughed! It was not the reckless laughter of the person who is laughing defiantly, or to hide tears; it was the laughter of someone who has a clearly defined philosophy of life, who can see a humorous side, in even the most apparently dismal things. What was her secret? I believe it was partly that she accepted what had come to her with the simplicity of a child who accepts what its father gives it as a difficult task. She did not kick against the pricks or grumble at the inevitable. She accepted it all—and laughed!

On the evening before Miles and I went away I paid her a farewell visit. Her bed was drawn near to the window, so that she could look out at the giants across the valley and the wide expanse of sky.

"I've been very busy since tea-time," she said; "I've been counting up all the compensations, and there are ever so many more than I thought there could be."

"Compensations?" I faltered.

"Yes. It is perfectly easy to see my disabilities. They are very simple, and well-defined. I can't walk, and I've got to lie still for the rest of my life." Just for the fraction of a second a shadow swept over her face, but it was gone again instantly, and her smile flashed out. "But to set against those disadvantages I have dozens of compensations—actually dozens. I have a husband who won't grumble all the time because his wife can't do things with him." Again came that fleeting shadow, and a little sadness crept into her eyes, but not to stay. It was gone almost as soon as I had realised its presence, and her voice, very gay and sweet went on. "Then I've got my arms! Only think how much worse it would have been if my arms had gone phut instead of my legs. As it is, I shall be able to do ever so many things—write, and work, and knit, and paint. Oh! I've been planning occupations to last me for years and years!"

"I agree with you about arms and legs," I said, trying to emulate her cheerfulness. "I have always declared that if I must lose the use of one or the other, I would rather be legless than armless."

"Oh, I should think so," she agreed fervently. "To sit still and do nothing—could anything be more dreary? And the fact that you had been able to take a walk before sitting down would not really make up for useless arms. But you have not a quarter heard what my compensations are.

Friends come next. You will come and see me, and Bridget, and lots and lots more; and there will be unlimited time to talk, because I shan't be able to say 'I am very sorry, I must fly off to this meeting or that committee.' I shan't be able any more to fly off to committees and meetings. My friends will always find me, and they will always be welcome. Val has planned exactly how he can put my bed at home, so that I shall be able to look out over the garden and see the Cathedral—and by turning ever so little I believe I shall be able to see that green shoulder of down which I love."

"You will still be in the Close for some time?"

"I think so—certainly for the rest of the summer and autumn. Val, as I told you, talks of a house on the downs, to satisfy my craving for big spaces; but in many ways I would rather stay in the Close, within reach of my friends; and from my bedroom I can hear the organ in the Cathedral," she ended with apparent inconsequence. "As for the books I shall read," she continued, before I could speak, "you have no idea what a number of books I have longed to digest as well as read; only there has not been time even to read them."

"You talk as if that horrible accident was a blessing in disguise," I burst out.

"I don't know about—*disguise*," she answered. "To use it as a blessing is the only possible use to which it can be put, isn't it? I can't let it lie

about in that gorge doing nothing!" she ended quaintly.

"Rosemary!" I exclaimed, when I bent down to kiss her and say good-bye, "I can't understand how you do it."

"How I do what?" Her eyes were full of genuine surprise.

"How you can be so brave—so laughing—so gay?"

She smiled, and I shall never forget her smile.

"Do you know some words in a Salvation Army hymn," she questioned, "'He'll carry you through'? I have never heard the rest of the hymn, I don't know any more of it than that; but those words have helped me over and over and over again—'He'll carry you through.' And that is what He does," she added, with characteristic simplicity, "He carries me through."

Her words haunted me throughout our journey home, the journey which is so breathlessly beautiful. We elected to come by the Lötschthal railway; and Miles and I spent our time with our noses very literally glued to the window panes, trying to drink in all the loveliness and the rugged grandeur. The Lake of Thun, very peaceful and still, the lingering sunset touching its waters, and the brooding mountains that wrap it round, was a fitting last picture of Switzerland, before the night swallowed up the landscape in velvety all-prevailing darkness. But throughout the journey, above the sound of wheels

and whistles and clanking brakes, Rosemary's triumphant voice rang in my heart—"He'll carry you through."

"She is an inspiration," I said once to Miles, and he answered with quiet reverence:

"Yes, indeed, she is an inspiration. Thank God for valiant souls like hers."

Many weeks went by before I saw her again. Meanwhile, we settled down once more into the round of Branchester life, which seemed so oddly the same, and not the same, as when we went away! So much had happened in the interval that I suppose, in a sense, we ourselves were different. But the town jogged along at its usual pace, in its usual fashion; and I felt rather as if I had suddenly been dropped back into a slightly stagnant pool, after a prolonged swim in a far-reaching sea!

Elizabeth stayed at Montana for a week or two, until the nurse sent out from England had become, as she put it, "acclimatised"; and Mr. Courtenay lingered on in the hotel, waiting to escort her home. Mr. Mason had perforce left the place soon after the accident; urgent work at home called him back.

Our garden was in its full glory of summer blooming; and the herbaceous border made a picture to rejoice the heart of any garden lover. People flocked to call and to hear the latest accounts of Rosemary, who had wound herself round everybody's heart. At least, I am not sure whether she had succeeded in creeping into Miss Sternaby's

rather withered and exclusive organ! But the rest of the citizens of Branchester adored her; and they had long learnt to see that what they had first regarded as eccentricity was in very truth only the outcome of a big, loving and lovable nature.

We met Miss Sternaby in the street; and she, as Miles remarked, "brazened it out very cleverly"!

"Oh! I *am* glad to meet you, dear Mrs. Hanley," she said, smiling with exaggerated toothiness. "I was intending to run in one afternoon to ask you for first-hand news of poor dear Mrs. Denton. I knew I should get news first-hand from you."

"Mrs. Denton is going on very well," I answered; and I thought I was quite courteous, but Miles said an obvious poker was making my back positively perpendicular!

"Ah! But I am afraid it is only a *comparative* 'going on well,' isn't it?" Miss Sternaby blinked her small eyes at me. "When the news came of that *dreadful* accident, it was a shock to us all. The whole town felt a sense of personal grief and anxiety. I was only *just* back myself. I had a *charming* tour after I left you at dear little Varese. But dear Mrs. Denton's sad condition seems to have cast a gloom over everything."

"There is nothing about her to make anyone gloomy," I retorted. "The word gloom would seem quite unsuitable and absurd in her presence."

"Very wonderful"—Miss Sternaby's head wagged

—" *very* wonderful; I only hope there won't be a *terrible* reaction. Sometimes those people who keep up so marvellously break down in the long run."

I had the impression of a cat licking her lips after a choice morsel; and as Rosemary's white face and valiant eyes flashed before me, I wanted—yes, I really wanted, to slap Miss Sternaby's smirking countenance.

"Mrs. Denton is not likely to have a reaction," I said, and I said it very shortly; my patience was fraying out. "I am afraid we must get on now."

Miles declared I turned tail and ran away; and perhaps it was as well I did run away, or I might have said rude things, or done them!

"I wonder whether she and that tawny-haired minx still keep up their ill-assorted friendship," I remarked to Miles, as we walked along the High Street.

"Quite unlikely!" my placid husband rejoined. "The tawny-haired one would not want to go on being friendly with her when all the little comedy of Varese was over. They put their heads together to abuse your Bridget—and then, I am prepared to swear, the whole thing fizzled out."

Miles was probably right. I certainly never again heard Miss Sternaby mention Kitty Renshaw; and indeed I noticed that our time together at Varese was a topic she religiously avoided! When I met her she talked enthusiastically of other places

she had visited ; but she wiped those days at Varese off the slate !

Bridget had settled down again in the house by the gate, and was once more immersed in works of helpfulness. I remember being struck by the remark of a sick woman whose case she had been deputed to investigate—a sick and very poor woman, Mrs. Canfield.

“What I say is,” Mrs. Canfield whispered to me, in her tired weak voice, “what I say is, she understands. She don’t come and look at you, as if she was looking from ever so far off, and couldn’t make out what kind of a person you might be. Mrs. Groveland, she knows what trouble is. You can see that by the way she listens to you, and takes it all in. She knows. She isn’t going by hearsay—she knows for herself. And she helps us others by knowing.”

“She helps us others by knowing.” The words stayed in my mind. I repeated them afterwards to Bridget, and a pleased look leapt into her eyes.

“I am glad,” she said. “I believe it does make it easier to understand other people, if you have been through bad times yourself. You aren’t looking at the badness from outside, you have been in it, and know.”

I did feel that Bridget was making good. No one could have worked harder and more conscientiously and lovingly than she worked ; and although a good many of our more rigid and

conventional fellow-citizens were still inclined to look askance at her, there were others who—though tardily and rather grudgingly—held out the right hand of fellowship.

“ I deserve all I get,” she said simply. “ I did what was wrong, and I am suffering for it. I recognise that now ; and I am not going to kick against it any more. If I can live the past down, well and good ; if not, then I must still say, ‘ well and good.’ I can only keep on keeping on ! ”

CHAPTER XXI

AUTUMN DAYS

ELIZABETH came to Branchester when the leaves on the limes in the Close were turning yellow ; and the chestnut trees in our garden stood like molten gold against a background of blue sky. Over our grey old walls the Virginia creeper hung a mantle of glowing red ; and the beeches in the Dentons' garden shone like molten copper. In what I called our "wild patch," close to the stream, we had a feathery loveliness of Michaelmas daisies, in every variety of shape, from the tiny, tiny white stars to the bigger ones that opened lilac eyes to the sunshine. Our dahlias along the wall of the Cathedral made a vivid mass of colour ; and from hidden corners here and there came the penetrating sweetness of autumn violets.

Elizabeth loved the garden. She said it was so restful to have a cathedral sitting on your lawn ; and she spent many minutes of her time watching the jackdaws flying about the tower and the rooks wheeling overhead.

"I love their peaceful voices," she exclaimed.

“Often in the East, when I heard the kites, I used to shut my eyes and let myself fancy they were rooks; and I could easily make myself see some of the nice grey buildings at home, set in their green places, with elms glistening red in the meadows near by, and the celandines just coming into blossom, and the rooks making their nests overhead!”

Mr. Courtenay did not come with her for that first visit. He had a good deal of business to arrange, and Elizabeth was to join him later, at the house of his sister in London. Miles and I had insisted upon it that she should be married from our house, and when we promised that everything should be done as quietly and unobtrusively as she wished, she gratefully accepted our offer.

Miss Sternaby mysteriously disappeared during the time Elizabeth was with us. When I met her afterwards, she murmured rather incoherently of a visit to London she had been obliged to pay, but her explanations were a trifle confused, and her sheepish expression gave her away more than she perhaps quite realised.

Elizabeth charmed our friends in Branchester; and as for Bridget, her welcome bubbled over with happiness. Two memories especially come back to me, when I think of those days of Elizabeth's visit. One, a memory of something she said to me about Bridget, as we sat one afternoon in the drawing-room, that was sweet with violets,

watching the light fade over the garden, and the grey old buildings.

"Bridget has faced life so magnificently," she said. "At every step she is wiping out all the old ugliness."

"I admire Bridget more than I can say," was my answer, "and by sheer pluck and personality she is wearing down some of the prejudice against her here."

"I wish a good man would come along and see the intrinsic goodness in her, and take permanent care of her," was Elizabeth's thoughtful answer. "Because she made one bad mistake in her life, I don't feel as if she ought to be for ever shut out from happiness."

"My dear, the sheep inside the fold are convinced that the little lost one outside ought to remain for ever on the other side of the fence, engaged in good works, and leaving happiness alone," was my dry response. "A really very nice woman was talking to me the other day about a girl whose circumstances were rather like Bridget's circumstances, and she held up hands of pious horror at the bare idea of the poor girl marrying! She talked about people who yielded to their lusts, and in the end were still allowed to marry and be happy! She made me rather sick."

"She would have made me very sick," Elizabeth retorted. "Anybody who had known Bridget a day would know that she had been down into hell ;

and if she can find anything to lift her right away from the very remembrance of that hell, we ought all to be glad."

"Elizabeth, I wish you were going to settle in Branchester," I exclaimed; "you might have a mellowing effect upon some of the inhabitants. If only one could make them understand the difference between the sin and the sinner! If only one could widen their horizons! You might do both."

"I don't feel competent to broaden other people's horizons," Elizabeth said; "it takes me all my time, and more, to learn to keep my own horizon approaching to an adequate breadth! But—setting aside your good neighbours here—I have a comforting conviction that Bridget *will* finally win through!"

That is one of the vivid memories of Elizabeth's autumn visit which recurs to me. The other is of an afternoon when the downs about the town lay in mellow sunlight, and the elm trees in the meadows wore crowns of gold.

"I'm going for a walk all by myself," Elizabeth said after lunch. "I want to make a little exploring expedition."

I spent the afternoon working in the garden, delighting in the voices of the rooks and jackdaws; in the mild radiance of the autumn day; in the pink delicacy of the monthly roses that still nodded against the grey walls, and the subtly mingled

fragrance of burning weeds and hidden violets, and an absurd plant of mignonette which was trying to pretend it was still summer.

Elizabeth came back before the sunlight had left the garden, and she joined me there, seating herself beside me on a bench in a sheltered corner, where the far rays of the westering sun could touch our faces. She carried in her hand a branch of spindle, and the soft pink berries were already opening, to show the orange seeds within.

"I wanted to see the copse again," she said suddenly. "I went up the same little path to the downs; and the hazel leaves are all brown now. But the downs look just the same—so green, and wide, and beautiful. I dare say you think me a sentimental fool?" Just a touch of fierceness crept into her voice, but I shook my head.

"No, I do *not* think you a sentimental fool. Coming back here again, it was natural you should want to see that particular place. Heaven defend me from those cold-blooded people, who use the name of sentimentality for every little atom of tender sentiment or memory! It is a word thoroughly misused."

"That copse and the great clean sweep of the sunlit downs seem such a fitting embodiment of all my remembrance of Bernard," Elizabeth said softly, "and—you may call me fantastic or ridiculous if you like, but it seemed to me he was so near me up there to-day."

"And why not?" I asked. "Why should it be either ridiculous or fantastic? Oh! my dear, I have no patience, none at all, with the people who can't see on either side of their tiresome blinkers; who can't realise that there may be, and almost certainly are, phenomena in the universe which their puny understandings have not yet grasped."

"They would think I was suffering from hallucinations; or on the verge of lunacy; or deceiving myself out of my own subconsciousness!"

"Let them think," I retorted with scorn. "Are you the type of woman to have hallucinations, or fits of mania? I believe with absolute certainty that those we love, who have gone on into the Fuller Life, are still near us, helping, guiding, guarding us; and some of us are able to get into touch with them—at any rate enough in touch to be conscious of their nearness."

"Yes. I am often conscious of Bernard's nearness." Elizabeth's voice was very soft and positive. "To-day most especially I was conscious of it; and I know quite surely that he thinks I am right in marrying Guy. It is my chance of carrying happiness to another human being," she added, "and I am glad."

She said no more. We sat silently watching the golden light fade from tree-tops and grey wall; and with the first chilly touch of sunset we moved into the house; and Elizabeth talked of Rosemary's

future—and then of her own. There were no morbid regrets or repinings in her heart. She was going forward confidently to her future—not burying her past, but carrying the best of it with her into the days that were yet to be.

She had not buried the best of herself with Bernard Drake. The best of Bernard Drake was living in her life!

It was whilst she was still with us that Mr. Bannerly came. Elizabeth and I met him first at the Deanery; and from the beginning I liked his kind ugly face. Not that one thought afterwards whether his face was ugly or not; ugliness was an insignificant trifle! What one remembered were his eyes—the eyes of a saint. Their colour? Was it grey, or blue, or a subtle mixture of the two? In any case, their colour was quite immaterial. It was the saintliness which lay behind them that mattered—their sincerity, their serenity; but, above all, their saintliness. I come back to that. Christopher Bannerly's eyes were the eyes of a saint.

He was not in the least a self-righteous prig. His jolly laugh rang out most infectiously; and his sense of humour often found vent in laughter. He was one of those friendly souls with whom everybody is at once on good terms; and he accepted the hospitality of Branchester with a boyish pleasure which endeared him to us even more.

One of Miles' remarks about him has remained in my mind. Miles' criticisms of his fellow-beings never lacked discernment. He had a way of coming out with them musingly, whilst he sat smoking his pipe.

"That chap Bannerly," he said, "more than anybody I have ever met, carries out those old words, 'Except ye become as little children.' He has the heart of a child."

Bridget was not at the tea party where Mr. Bannerly and I first met. The Deanery was one of the houses from which she had always been rigidly excluded; and if the Dean's wife by chance passed me in the street when I was talking to Bridget, she would look down her nose and, as I told Miles, "metaphorically sniff and draw her skirts more closely round her." But Bridget and Mr. Bannerly did eventually meet; and there come floating back to me the very words he used about her, when he and I met in the Close on that same afternoon.

We spoke of some particularly sad case of poverty in the parish to which he had come as curate; and in the home of those poor folk he had met Bridget.

"Her eyes look as if she had seen into hell," he said, with curious abruptness.

"So she has," I answered. And then those eyes of his, which were the eyes of a saint, looked straight into mine.

"Then we must teach her to forget what she saw there," he said; and that was all.

He strode on up the avenue, between the leafless limes, but his words stayed with me; and I knew that Bridget had found another friend. Rumour—that busybody whose tongue can never be silent for long—had told us that Christopher Bannerly was only a bird of passage in Branchester. He was destined for the mission field, and had only come temporarily to our town, partly to gain experience differing from his former knowledge of work in a great London parish, partly because the strain of that London work had taken too heavy a toll even from his vigorous personality.

"Of course, I don't understand *why* Mr. Bannerly thinks it necessary to become a missionary," Miss Sternaby remarked, at one of the work-parties held on that particular occasion in my drawing-room. "Surely we have *plenty* of heathen in England, plenty of work for our clergy to do here?"

Miss Sternaby had by then begun to drop her more chastened attitude; she had, as Miles put it, "bobbed up again" like the proverbial cork.

"You think we Christians ought to keep ourselves to ourselves and leave the rest of the world alone?" I asked.

"You put it so quaintly," she giggled. "But *surely* charity does begin at home."

"Does it end at home too?" I said. "Should we really be right if we left our own people overseas

with no Christian teaching? If we left the non-Christian peoples without the light it is in our power to carry to them?"

"I'm sure I thought savages were *very* happy, and—and care-free, and all that," Miss Sternaby said vaguely.

"Some may be, but to the larger number life is one long fear—fear of this danger, or of that. They very literally walk in a great darkness."

I don't think she quite believed me, but then Miss Sternaby rarely, if ever, believed in anything of which she had not herself had cognisance!

Mr. Bannerly might have enlightened her further if she had heard a sermon he preached one Sunday evening. The congregation chiefly consisted of the working-class inhabitants of the parish; and in the simplest of language Mr. Bannerly was explaining to them that they had some responsibility for those other members of God's family in far-away lands. One phrase—no, two phrases—most especially fixed themselves in my brain. Firstly, he said that no Christian was truly a Christian unless he was also a missionary; we must hand on our privileges. And secondly, he asked us whether we had ever realised what it meant to live in a completely heathen land. He told us that the atmosphere there was evil—a strange brooding evil most difficult to resist; and he told us that whilst we thanked God that we were in a land which, with all its grave faults, had an atmosphere of

Christianity, we should, as well, do our utmost to lift away the cloud of heathenism and evil from those other members of God's family across the sea.

Bridget was there that night. Her eyes were fixed on the preacher's face; there was a sort of glow upon her own; and the shadow that it had so hurt me to see there, seemed to have gone.

CHAPTER XXII

“ AND SO—GOOD NIGHT ”

“ I DON'T know whether it will be right of me to do it ; I have come to ask you.”

Outside in the garden the winds of March were playing with my daffodils, until their golden heads swayed and bent, and a bed of grey-blue hyacinths which had the daffodils as a background rejoiced my heart. Our prunus near the water's edge was in bloom ; it showered white petals down upon the grass ; a blackbird had chosen its top branch upon which to sit and whistle his spring message. And looking into Bridget's face, I knew that there was something of spring in her eyes.

“ What have you come to ask me ? ” I said, drawing her down beside me on our big comfortable couch. “ And why shouldn't it be right for you to do it, whatever it is ? ”

“ It is—to take a wonderful gift, something I feel I am not worthy to take.”

“ Put it into plain language. I don't understand.”

“ Mrs. Hanley—Mr. Bannerly, Christopher Bannerly, asked me this morning if I would be his wife, and I——”

“ Oh, my dear, I am glad,” I broke in impetuously. “ Nothing could be better and happier for you. I *am* glad.”

“ Yes—but—ought I to let him do it ? ” she asked, her eyes full of anxious questioning. “ Ought I to accept such a big thing as this ? ”

“ Do you want to accept it ? ” I asked. The colour that came flushing into her face sufficiently answered my question ; but her eyes still held doubt.

“ The past is still there,” she said. “ I can’t put the past out of my life. It is there. I don’t mean that I care for—the other man any more, but the ugliness of the past is still there.”

“ Mr. Bannerly knows about it ? ”

“ Oh, yes, he knows ; of course he knows. Directly he began to show he liked my friendship, I told him the whole truth. I would not have let him have even my friendship on false pretences ; but what he asks now is something so much greater than friendship. Is it fair to him to give him what he asks ? ”

“ If he knows the whole truth, he is asking with his eyes open. Doesn’t it mean ”—I hesitated—“ doesn’t it mean that he loves you for yourself, just as you are, past and all ? Doesn’t it mean

that he wants to bury the past and help you to live above it? "

"That's what he says—if not just in those words, that is what he means." Her eyes shone mistily. "But I still don't know whether I should be right in letting him make such a big sacrifice."

"You are seeing things a little out of proportion, aren't you? If he loves you, if he knows everything, and still wants you for his wife, I don't think I should say he was making a big sacrifice in marrying you. Be just and fair to yourself, as well as to him."

"How?" She looked puzzled.

"By remembering that you have already put the past quite away. You are already making good. If you care for Mr. Bannerly, and he cares for you, there is no real reason why you should not be his wife."

The colour poured over her face. She took my hand and squeezed it so hard that I nearly cried out for mercy.

"I think it is because I want it so much that I feel doubtful," she said wistfully; "he is so good, and he rests me. He gives me such a sense of strength; I couldn't bear it if I hurt his life or his career. If I thought I should do him harm, I would never see him again."

"There is no reason why you should do him harm." I spoke very gently to soothe her excitement. "You will be a splendid helpmeet for him."

“ He is not asking me to settle down to a life of comfort and pleasure,” she said, with a little laugh ; “ he is not dreaming of giving up what he intended to do, and I would not let him give it up. If I say ‘ yes ’ to him, I shall go with him to share his work.”

“ You will go with him—into the wilds somewhere ? ” I think my voice must have sounded stupefied, for I myself felt a sense of stupefaction. Bridget was so essentially a creature of towns and town life that I could not visualise her set down in some Back of Beyond.

“ He is going into a very out-of-the-way corner of Africa,” she said calmly, as if she were merely talking of going to the next village. “ The life will be quite primitive, and quite hard work.”

“ But, my dear, will you find it possible to bear such an existence, after your life in England ? Are you counting the cost ? ”

“ He counted it for me,” she answered, with a radiant smile—such a smile as I had never before seen on Bridget’s face. “ He has counted it, until I know it down to the very uttermost farthing. But I am ready to pay it all, to go with him,” she added simply, “ if you really think I may go without treating him unfairly ? ”

“ Go, is what I say most emphatically. Go, and may God go with you,” I answered, with all reverence. “ I think you do understand that going out into the wilderness will mean a great

deal of sacrifice and service, even though you will be with the man you love? "

"Yes, I understand. He has made me understand it all, with a devastating clearness"—her eyes still shone—"and"—her voice dropped—"he has made me see that service and sacrifice are the heart of Christianity—the heart of life."

"I think your Christopher is a very wonderful person, and that you are a very lucky woman," I said. "I have an idea that he is a lucky man too," I added, laying my hand on hers. "You both have a great opportunity."

Christopher Bannerly came to see me a few days later, and my liking for him grew. It was easy to see that his love for Bridget was very deep and genuine—"the real thing," Miles called it; and his plain kind face was made beautiful by the kindling light of that love.

Those spring days seemed to rush on at an incredible pace; and besides all my usual avocations, my brain and hands were overflowing with the two weddings! Not that Bridget was to be married in Branchester. Both she and Christopher decided against it; and their wedding was held in an East London church. Bridget let her house by the gate. For the month before she was married she lived in rooms in a funny little street within hail of the Docks; and from her window the tall masts of ships were visible, outlined against the sky. The street was quiet enough; her lodgings were

clean and nice ; but close by rolled the great tide of East London life.

“I love all the folk down here,” Bridget said one day, when I went to tea with her in her lodgings, “and I admire their unselfishness and their generosity. I used to come here once to help with concerts and things, and the people always fascinated me. I mean to learn all I can from them before Christopher and I go out into the wilds.”

Their wedding was a quiet little function in a church where at intervals you could hear the sounds of hooters on the river ; of street traffic ; of the hoarse voices of costermongers. But I do not think the man and woman who were being made one, heard any of these sounds from the outside world. That supreme moment of their own lives was filling their thoughts, to the exclusion of everything else.

Bridget’s eyes made me feel glad when, in the little vestry, after the service, she lifted her face for my kiss. All their haunting misery had been wiped completely away. Something of the serenity which looked out from her husband’s eyes seemed to have been passed on to her. One no longer remembered that she had looked into hell. The past was dead ; and I felt it would never again come to life.

As for Elizabeth’s wedding, that too was very quiet, but the surroundings were almost startlingly different ! She and Mr. Courtenay were married

in the Lady Chapel of Branchester Cathedral, early one April morning, and Bishop Denton married them. The grey old building was singularly dignified and stately; a stream of sunshine poured through the window upon Elizabeth's face; and from the Close outside I could hear the rapturous song of a thrush.

Only Miles and I and one or two intimate friends were present; but as I knelt watching those two at the altar rails, the odd fancy came to me that Bernard Drake stood by Elizabeth's side, looking down at her with that wonderful smile of his which I had never forgotten.

"He has come to give her his blessing," the thought flashed across my mind, and, as Elizabeth suddenly glanced upwards, I wondered whether she too had all at once become conscious of that silent, approving presence.

Mr. Courtenay's face was radiant as he led his wife out into the April sunlight; and in Elizabeth's eyes I saw a look of peace. It was as though she had received a benediction!

When I told Miles all this, he did not say I was fanciful; he only looked at me with his own grave smile and said gently:

"Why should he not have come to bless her? It seems a natural sort of thing for him to do!"

My pen has rambled on with the ramblings of my mind; and I have made a book of fragments.

Only fragments ! But pieced together they are a mosaic of life ! And now the time has come to lay down my pen. All the mosaic has been tumbled into the Eternal Dustbin, where the dross and the worthlessness will be cast into oblivion ; and only what is fit to be saved will be taken on into the Fuller Life !

I suppose I am old, as men count age, but, as I sit here in the June loveliness of my garden, looking out over the great distances, my heart feels young.

And I gather up the threads !

Miles went on into that Fuller Life two years and more ago ; but before he left me, we had spent many, many happy days together here, in the house he had bought for our old age. And because of those happy days we have spent here together, Miles' presence and the sense of that happiness are always with me ; and sometimes I think he is even more closely with me than when his actual bodily form was by my side. I have never allowed any sadness to touch this happy place. To know that I was grieving would make Miles sad ; to allow sadness to haunt this place of peace would be to deny my certainty that Miles has only gone on before me into the next room !

The garden is gay with flowers ; the birds seem to love every corner of it ; and from the first grey streaks of dawn, until after the light has faded over the sea of landscape, they sing, and sing ! The life of the village ebbs and flows close beyond

my gates ; very often it flows through the gates, and I am made a sharer in all its joys and sorrows.

So many friends come in at the garden gate and sit with me here by the wall, where they can drink in all the restfulness of the sea of distance that spreads away to the far-off hills ! Miles called them the Celestial Mountains, and when the sun drops down, and leaves a golden sky behind those far-off hills, I feel as if the City of God must be just beyond their misty softness !

Friends of all sorts and kinds come to me ; friends too of all ages ; and greatest source of pride, the children come ! They steal in of their own accord, and bring me their toys, and their confidences ; and they seem to take it for granted that I can understand them quite as well as if I were a child myself !

Elizabeth and her husband often stay with me, and I like to know that she is giving him happiness—good measure, pressed down and running over ! She herself has found blessedness, and her eyes are full of peace.

We hear sometimes from Bridget. She and Christopher are doing work of which news comes to us from others—wonderful work, carrying to those who sit in darkness the certainty of a great Light.

Of Rosemary I hear too at times ; and she goes on her valiant way, spreading gladness and courage about her, and never losing heart ! As far as her

body is concerned, she is an invalid for life ; but nothing can daunt her indomitable soul, and the myriads of people who go to her for help and comfort never go away disappointed.

I look out into the blue distance beyond my wall, and as the blackbird flutes his evening song to me I think back to the words with which I began these fragments—“ Youth wins.” But does youth win ? Should we not see that both youth and age have in their turn their own victories ?

Or is it the ultimate, actual truth that what finally wins is *age which has never lost its youth* ?

The spirit of youth which glows on radiantly, though the body that contains it has grown worn and old ; is it not that spirit which attains the goal, which can claim the victor’s crown ?

That thought brings me full circle back to Elizabeth !

With her I struck the first note of my fragments ; with her too I must strike the last note. All the more so because she sits opposite to me on my little terrace, in this lovely June weather.

She holds a book in her hand, but her eyes are often lifted from its pages, to look across the low wall over which riot roses red, and white, and golden, to the great view beyond the foreground of pale green bracken, under trees of emerald colour. Up here upon our heights it is very still. Excepting for that blackbird on the lilac bush in the corner,

we are wrapped about by the silence of the uplands—no, not quite wrapped round by silence, because every now and again the larks poised somewhere far above us break into song ; and from the hillside comes the occasional bark of a dog, the tinkle of a sheep-bell. Yet these sounds only seem to emphasise the all-embracing stillness which comes before sunset.

The blue hills in the west are touched with the haze of light which presages the dropping down of the sun behind them ; the air is sweet with the sweetness of roses and the fragrance of the pine trees across the lawn. My glance turns from the loveliness of plain, and hills, and over-arching sky, to Elizabeth's face, and I smile as I realise that I am right. We should not say " Youth wins " or " Age wins," but rather " The Winners are the old who remain young."

Elizabeth has won ! She has lines on her face ; her hair is white ; youth is years and years behind her ; she has all the experience of many decades of life. And yet—the spirit of youth looks out of her eyes ; she is eager, interested, enthusiastic, with youth's gay buoyancy ; she has never allowed herself to become *blasé*, to stand still, to ossify. She has kept the windows of her soul wide open ; she is ready to learn—to gather new impressions, to welcome new ideas.

Elizabeth has never become static. She is perennially dynamic !

She has never lost her hold upon the spirit of youth.

Just as I wrote those words, she looked round at me and smiled.

“You look as if you were brimming over with some profound thought,” she said; and I realised that her voice held the same note of gladness I had heard in it when she first spoke to me in the ward of St. Matthias’ Hospital.

“I was making up my mind that you are dynamic—not static,” I said demurely.

“Static? I? I should hope not”—she laughed her delicious laugh, that was really laughter—“if by static you mean staying put, and feeling final! I don’t mean to stay put, or feel I have come to an end of new sensations or new anything, until I have to say good-bye to this blessed old world, and get ready to go into the new!”

“You have found the Elixir of perpetual youth,” I said dreamily, my gaze still fixed upon her face.

“That is an Elixir waiting for everybody, if they would only realise it,” was her answer; “it only means always keeping your heart and soul young, ready to learn, always keeping in touch with youth, never allowing the real you to grow old, whatever may happen to those outside clothes you call your body! Old age may touch the body—it need not ever touch the soul!”

We fell silent then. The larks overhead had ceased their singing, and the blackbird’s song was

done. Away in the west the sky turned golden behind the far-off hills, and a tiny wind went whispering through the pines.

I do not know how long we sat there silently before Elizabeth turned to me again and said very softly, as though echoing my earlier thought:

"I have never forgotten what you said to me once—all our lives go into the Eternal Dustbin—and there they are sorted out. What does not matter in them is thrown away—but the best goes on. The best in our lives goes on—goes on."

THE END

Double or Quit

By

E. Charles Vivian

A MURDERER is living in the same room as the undiscovered body of his victim, whom he must personate. At every turn of events the truth threatens to break out. Almost hourly the strain on his resource and invention increases. At last—the inevitable snap! The flight, the ingenious but hopeless devices, the rushings to and fro of the guilty wretch, like those of a cornered rat, are terrible in their stark realism.

By the same Author :

The Forbidden Door

Man Alone

Nine Days

The Tale of Fleur

Woman Dominant



Mr. Vivian is a brilliant writer of human romance with just that touch of pathos and adventure that gives life its savour.

Out of the Depths

By

Joseph Hocking

A SCEPTIC ex-convict, through a series of contributory circumstances, impersonates the new vicar of a small Cornish parish, and for a certain time officiates as him and carries out his duties. How gradually the core of the man becomes slowly wholesome under the influence of his experiences as a priest, and how he is at last forced by his conscience to confess the whole deception, is told by Mr. Hocking in a story that is truly remarkable. The problem is raised from the sensational plane to the spiritual, and the close of the story is full of sincerity and beauty.

Other popular stories by this Author :

The Purple Robe

Heartsease

The Tenant of Cromlech
Cottage

The Scarlet Woman

An Enemy Hath Done This

Roger Trewinion

The Sign of the Triangle

Nancy Trevanion's Legacy

C There are few better story-tellers than Mr. Joseph Hocking, especially when he is dealing with his beloved Cornwall. His stories are thrillingly interesting, and rivet the attention of the reader from beginning to end.

The North Sea Mystery

By

Harry Edmonds

A GROUP of ex-service officers, under the direction of a war-time head in the secret service, set out to investigate some suspicious circumstances that had been noted on a lonely part of the German coast. They unearthed a gigantic international conspiracy to destroy the British Navy. How this was to be effected by unparalleled means, and how it was checkmated by the audacity and cleverness of Nicholls the English spy, becomes in the telling one of the most exciting tales of adventure written for many a long day.

C This story reveals the author as a master of the breathless pace which whir's a reader along whether he will or not.

Stepping Stones

By

L. G. Moberly

MISS MOBERLY is a past mistress of the emotional story, and the tale of Enid and "Baby Hilary" is no exception to her skill. It is one that will appeal to every mother heart, while the romance running through the book like a golden thread gives the pathos of the unfolded situation its full power. Miss Moberly has done nothing better than "Stepping Stones."

Some of Miss Moberly's previous successes :

The Voice	Heart of Gold
Angela's Marriage	A Tangled Web
The Sin of Alison Dering	A Waif of Destiny
After Long Years	Little Greatheart
Fingers of Fate	Threads of Life
	Renewal

C In the long list of successful novelists Miss Moberly takes a high place. Her novels are not merely thrillers, but a readable love story is invariably woven into the mystery.

White Flame

By

E. Maria Albanesi

CHARLES was a social butterfly, a do-nothing and philander. But to make a home for a sweetheart he accepted the hard life and deadly routine of a factory worker. And Anne let him go through the mill, keeping secret the fact that she had a fortune more than sufficient for them both. The author's success is the completeness with which we accept both Anne and Charles as real people who actually accomplished these very hard tasks.

By the same Author :

Truant Happiness
Diana Falls in Love
Gold in the Dust

Patricia and Life
The Green Country
The House that Jane Built
A Heart for Sale



"A novel in Madame Albanesi's best manner is a delightful thing, nearly perfect of its kind."—*Saturday Review*.

Thieves' Nights

By

Harry Stephen Keeler

BAYARD DE LANCEY was the King of Thieves. A Russian by birth, and educated in England at the expense of an English nobleman, he is cosmopolitan to his finger-tips. He is also clever with a cleverness not to be acquired through ordinary education, and Mr. Keeler, in one of his most vivid stories, makes full use of the opportunities which such a type affords. The hero of the book, too, is a man of adventure, and when he is paid by a father to impersonate his dead son the situation is created for so remarkable a set of events that no lover of ingenious fiction can afford to miss it.

Popular successes by this Author:

The Amazing Web
The Fourth King
The Voice of the Seven Sparrows
Sing Sing Nights
The Spectacles of Mr. Cagliostro

C All who love strong character and thrilling incident will revel in this essentially clever story.

The Fighting Spirit

By

Effie Adelaide Rowlands

A YOUNG society girl with a passion for dancing, for which she has a natural genius, makes the undesirable acquaintance of a professional dancer and incurs the jealousy of his partner. But her own high courage carries her through, and she manages in addition to rescue the woman who hated her. The feature of the novel is the youthfulness, the beauty, and courageous innocence of the principal character.

Other popular Stories by this Author :

The Rose of Life
Carlton's Wife
They Laugh that Win
In Love's Land
A Girl with a Heart
Love's Young Dream
Money or Wife?
Sunset and Dawn
The Man She Loved
The Game of Life
A Dangerous Woman
While Faith Endures

The Flame of Love
Young Hearts
Through Weal and Through
Woe
Out of a Clear Sky
Brave Love
The Man from the West
A Bunch of Blue Ribbons
The Gates of Happiness
Lights and Shadows
Fine Feathers
Spring in the Heart

C "Miss Rowlands has the reputation of producing extremely readable wholesome novels."—*The Aberdeen Journal*.

The Admirable Simmons

By
Katharine Tynan

SIMMONS was the wonderful and perfect servant, and his life was a long series of actions of self-sacrifice and self-abnegation. But towards the end of the story Miss Tynan deals with him more definitely and more searchingly, until we have to believe that "the admirable Simmons" was a man of very unusual calibre indeed, less perfect perhaps but still in his way wonderful at something else than "service." Miss Tynan has written one of her most vivid stories around his character.

Other popular Stories by this Author :

The House on the Bog
Pat the Adventurer
Dear Lady Bountiful
The Briar Bush Maid
A Fine Gentleman

The Heiress of Wyke
The Wild Adventure
The Face in the Picture
Castle Perilous
The Most Charming Family

C "Clean, wholesome love stories, free from intrigue and sensationalism, and containing well-drawn characters and good dialogue."

White Hands Cannot Offend

By

A. R. and R. K. Weekes

A GIRL of the aristocratic house of Radolin, in escaping from the attentions of the monarch of a small European country, falls into the hands of brigands and is married by force to their chief. Later, both she and he, together with her brother, a priest, make a thrilling escape from pursuit by the royal forces. This is a book of unusual interest, not merely because it deals vividly with swift actions but also because the character-drawing is both subtle and penetrative. It is a book to be read twice.

C "The Authors display considerable skill and handle difficult situations with marked ingenuity. To those who love a story tinged with romance and exciting incidents, the authors will afford much pleasure."

A Wonder for Wise Men

By

Wallace B. Nichols

THOUGH an historical romance, this book is much more than that, for its theme touches present-day ideas in a remarkable manner, especially as concerns the hideous uselessness of war. It is set in the reign of Henry VII and deals with the aftermath of the Wars of the Roses. The principal character becomes one of the King's most trusted instruments in the founding of modern England, and the story marches to an emotional and uplifting close. This is an historical novel where the characters are not puppets of impossible romance, but living human beings as real as the people about us every day.

By the same Author :

SECRET MARKET

"This is a first novel by one of our younger poets, and it is a novel which equally plainly shows him to be an artist. The plot is cleverly developed, and the story ends at once dramatically and artistically."—*The Glasgow Herald*.

BRITTLE GLORY

"Wallace B. Nichols deserves congratulation. He has demonstrated a capacity for expression, in terms of strength, beauty and sincerity, through two mediums.

"It is an uncommon book with an outstanding quality : it never ceases to be readable."—*The Observer*.



"Mr. Nichols has all the gifts of a great novelist : an unerring sense of character, and a distinguished literary style."—*The Referee*.

A Clue in Wax

By

Fred M. White

CHERITON, author and policeman, while engaged on a case concerned with stolen jewels, pulls off a great success in his first novel. He resigns from the Force to take to authorship seriously, and settles at a small South Coast resort. But at once he finds himself in the midst of a new web of mystery and crime. Detective instincts reawaken and he plunges into the tangle only to find that he is led back to the original jewel mystery which he had been investigating. This absorbing novel shows that Mr. Fred M. White has lost none of his old ingenuity and power.

Other recent Stories by this Author :

The Five Knots	The Wings of Victory
The Brand of Silence	The Councillors of Falconhoe
The Golden Rose	The Slave of Silence
The Four Fingers	A Crime on Canvas
The Turn of the Tide	The Riddle of the Rail
The King Diamond	

C

"Mr. White is a master of the breathless pace which whirls a reader along, whether he will or not."—*Yorkshire Observer*.

Mr. Fortune Explains

By

H. C. Bailey

“MR. FORTUNE” has long since established himself as one of the brightest stars in the galaxy of modern crime detectives. He works on the friendliest terms with Scotland Yard, but his methods—and incidentally his manners—are peculiarly his own. Here we have a series of the most widely divergent mysteries successively solved by a bland, imperturbable middle-aged gentleman whose sole concern in life appears to be that he shall not miss his lunch or any other comfort that is due to him. No one who has read other “Mr. Fortune” volumes will on any account miss this, while those who have yet to make the dear man’s acquaintance are to be envied for the joy that awaits them.

Other popular volumes by Mr. H. C. Bailey :

Call Mr. Fortune	Mr. Fortune’s Trials
Mr. Fortune, Please	Karl of Erbach
Mr. Fortune’s Practice	The Master of Gray
Mr. Fortune Speaking	My Lady of Orange, etc.

C Mr. H. C. Bailey is not only a master in the realm of historic romance, but in that of the mystery story as well : in fact, he is easily one of the best and most logical of all the many writers of the detective story to-day.

The Subway Mystery

By
Ben Bolt

ONE would think it impossible for anybody to walk down into the crowded new Piccadilly Circus Tube Station and there be swiftly murdered without immediate discovery of the assassin. But from the slenderest of clues the whole failure of a great vengeance is discovered, and Mr. Ben Bolt has provided in his new story a series of situations and adventures that would keep the sleepiest reader agog for the end.

By the same Author:

The Mystery of Belvoir Mansions
The Sword of Fortune
Captain Lucifer
Jewels of Sin
The Badge
The Buccaneer's Bride
The Other Three

C This story reveals the author as one of the best among modern writers of mystery.

Gambler's Hope

By

J. J. Bell

ADMIRERS of "Wee Macgregor" and kindred works will be interested to see what the talented author makes of a more ambitious theme. Subtle characterization is here combined with the thrills of an Armada treasure hunt, complicated by the misunderstandings and perplexities of three widely divergent love affairs. The scenes are laid partly in Spain, partly in the Western Isles, and what with bloodstained daggers, mysterious scraps of parchment, buried caskets, plotting priests, mysterious garden-haunting strangers, and speedy motor-boats, the reader is kept constantly guessing.

C "From the simplest and most ordinary of ingredients J. J. Bell can manufacture page after page of chuckles." *The Glasgow Record*.

"Mr. Bell's fine powers of characterization are very evident in his work. There are few who can so happily suggest the Scot as he."—*The Notts Journal*.
